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### Violent Couples Seeking Therapy: Bilateral and Unilateral Violence

Madsen, C., Stith, S., Thomsen, C. & McCollum, E. (2012). Therapy-seeking violent couples: Bilateral and unilateral violence. *Partner Abuse, 3*, (1), 43-58.

#### Abstract

Little information is available about couples experiencing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) who voluntarily seek couples therapy. We examined the characteristics of 129 couples who sought therapy for IPV to learn more about this population. A majority of the sample, 74%, experienced bilateral physical violence, 16% experienced unilateral male violence, and 5% experienced unilateral female violence. Conflict theory is used to explain the finding that couples experiencing bilateral violence reported higher levels of physical violence and injury than did those experiencing unilateral violence. Bilaterally violent couples also experienced more jealousy and psychological aggression and less relationship satisfaction than either group of unilaterally violent couples. Implications and suggestions for clinicians are offered, as well as ideas for future research.

**KEYWORDS: Intimate Partner Violence, Therapy-Seeking, Bilateral Violence, Unilateral Violence**

### Violent Couples Seeking Therapy: Bilateral and Unilateral Violence

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) rates as high as 70% have been identified in couples being treated in regular outpatient settings, that is, settings that do not specialize in treating IPV (O'Leary & Murphy, 1992). Jose and O'Leary (2009) reviewed current literature on couples treatment, and contacted authors of papers when necessary to examine the rate of IPV for males and females. They report rates of aggression for male-to-female violence from 36.3% to 58%. They also report rates of female-to-male violence from these studies to range from 36.4% to 57%. Thus, even when clinicians believe that they do not treat violent couples, it is unlikely that this is the case. However, most state batterer treatment standards do not permit conjoint therapy for court-involved offenders (Maiuro & Eberle, 2008). One reason that conjoint treatment of IPV is not permitted by most standards is a belief by the individuals who developed the standards that the primary cause of IPV is abuse of power and control, and that inequities of power make conjoint treatment unsafe and ineffective. Although we have some evidence that conjoint treatment can be safe and effective (e.g., Fals-Stewart, Klostermann, & Clinton-Sherrod, 2009; Mills, 2008; O'Leary, Heyman, & Neidig, 1999; Stith, McCollum, Amanor-Boadu, & Smith, in press), we have little knowledge about couples that voluntarily seek help for IPV. As it becomes increasingly clear that couples experiencing IPV often seek treatment from clinicians, the need for clinicians to have accurate information about these couples becomes more apparent

(Simpson, Doss, Wheeler, & Christensen, 2007). This is especially true for couples who seek therapy specifically designed for couples experiencing IPV.

The present study was designed to answer several questions about couples experiencing IPV who voluntarily seek specialized IPV treatment: 1) What is the level of physical and psychological violence, injury, relationship satisfaction, and jealousy in these couples? 2) Do these characteristics vary depending upon the gender of the perpetrator and victim? 3) Do these characteristics vary depending on whether the couple exhibits unilateral or bilateral violence?

### Literature Review

One of the most important breakthroughs in our understanding of IPV has been the realization that all violence is not the same (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Building on a growing body of research demonstrating heterogeneity among couples experiencing IPV along a variety of dimensions, researchers have developed typologies of violent relationships.

One of the most innovative and well-known typologies of relationship violence was developed by Michael Johnson and his colleagues (Johnson, 2005; 2006; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). These scholars distinguished four types of heterosexual violence; the two most common are the focus of this study: *intimate terrorism* and *situational couple violence*. The distinguishing feature of Intimate Terrorism is “a pattern of violent and nonviolent behaviors that indicates a general motive to control” (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000, p. 949). *Situational couple violence* describes a type of IPV that does not have its basis in the dynamics of power and control; instead instances of violence tend to arise from conflict and arguments between the couple. According to Johnson and Ferraro (2000), intimate terrorism (compared to situational couple violence) is characterized by aggression that is more frequent, more likely to escalate over time and more likely to involve serious injury. It is also less likely to be mutual (i.e.,

bilateral) than is situational couple violence. Situational couple violence is gender symmetric, and may involve violence by either or both members of a couple. It is also more likely to be mutual (i.e., bilateral) (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). In contrast, intimate terrorism is most likely to involve unilateral violence perpetrated by the male partner, although some females also perpetrate intimate terrorism. Johnson (2005) asserts that although intimate terrorism is the type of violence that the general public associates with the words ‘domestic violence,’ situational couple violence is the most prevalent type of violence. Situational couple violence is more likely to be found in general population samples, and intimate terrorism is more common in samples drawn from domestic violence agency settings (e.g., individuals arrested for assault, battered women’s shelters) (Johnson, 2006).

Although in this study we do not have a measure of control, we are interested in understanding how the level of physical violence and injury is related to whether the violence is bilateral or unilateral. We would expect that bilateral violence is more likely to occur in couples experiencing situational couple violence than in couples experiencing intimate terrorism. We would also expect that couples coming voluntarily for treatment of IPV would be more likely to be experiencing situational couple violence.

A large body of previous research has examined the issue of gender symmetry in violent relationships. A recent study by Hines and Douglas (2010) found that, according to self-reports of men who reported experiencing intimate terrorism, 55% of the men also used IPV in the previous year. Furthermore, McDonald, Jouriles, Tart, and Minze (2009) reported that, according to self-reports of women in a shelter for battered women, more than 60% of the women used severe physical aggression in the previous year against their partner. Therefore, it is clear that bilateral violence can be prevalent in relationships identified as experiencing

intimate terrorism. Additionally, recent research has explored the differences between perpetrators of bidirectional versus unidirectional IPV in a community sample of young adults (Charles, Whitaker, Le, Swahn, & DiClemente, 2011). This research showed that compared with perpetrators of unidirectional IPV, perpetrators of bidirectional IPV had more problematic family histories, engaged in riskier behaviors, and reported worse psychological outcomes. However, the authors suggest that future research should examine the severity levels of unidirectional vs. bidirectional violence and the injury levels of these two types of violence. The current study examines unidirectional vs. bilateral violence within a sample of couples seeking treatment.

As noted previously, Jose and O'Leary (2009) also reported a high level of violence by both men and women seeking couples therapy. However, only a few studies have specifically examined the types of violence experienced by therapy-seeking couples. Simpson et al. (2007) used latent class analysis to determine the types of violence experienced by 273 therapy-seeking married couples. Couples were classified into three categories based on their level of violence: no violence (21.3%), low-level violence (38.5%) and moderate-to-severe violence (40.3%). The majority (approximately 80%) of couples in this sample exhibited IPV, with a reported frequency of violence lower than that typically observed in samples from shelters or batterer treatment programs. However, Simpson et al. (2007) did not examine whether the violence was more likely to be unilateral or bilateral, nor did they compare characteristics of couples experiencing unilateral vs. bilateral violence. They suggest that more research is needed to further illuminate the characteristics of couples seeking therapy. A primary goal of the current study was to increase our understanding of these couples and to examine distinctions between unilaterally and bilaterally violent couples.

To understand the violence experienced by couples seeking therapy for high levels of conflict or IPV, three predictors of IPV (i.e., level of physical violence and injury) were examined: jealousy, psychological aggression, and relationship satisfaction. These risk factors were identified as significant predictors of IPV in a meta-analysis conducted by Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, and Tritt (2004).

#### *Jealousy, Psychological Aggression and Relationship Satisfaction*

There is substantial evidence that high levels of jealousy (Hanson, Cadsky, Harris, & Lalonde, 1997; Holtzworth-Munroe, Stuart, & Hutchinson, 1997) and psychological aggression (Aldarondo & Sugarman, 1996; Feldbau-Kohn, Heyman, & O'Leary, 1998; Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christenson, 1999), and low levels of relationship satisfaction (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Sagrestano et al., 1999; Stith, Green, Smith, & Ward, 2007) are risk factors for IPV. Previous research has also examined gender differences in these risk factors. In general, men report higher levels of relationship satisfaction than women (DeMaris, 2010; Dillaway & Broman, 2001). Findings on gender differences in psychological aggression are less conclusive with both males and females reporting high levels of psychological aggression (Jose and O'Leary, 2009). Finally, in general, men experience more cognitive jealousy in relationships than do women (Aylor & Dainton, 2001) and jealousy is a strong predictor of partner aggression for men and women (O'Leary, Smith Slep, O'Leary, 2007). Nevertheless, previous research has not examined how these variables differ in unilaterally vs. bilaterally violent therapy-seeking couples.

#### *Physical Violence and Injury*

Physical violence and injury have been explored within the context of unilaterally vs. bilaterally violent couples. Johnson (2006) reports that the intimate terrorism form of IPV is

more likely to result in injury than is situational couple violence. In a secondary analysis of data collected in both domestic violence agencies and general settings in Pittsburg in the 1970s (Frieze, 1983), Johnson found that injuries were experienced by 76% of the victims of intimate terrorism compared to 28% of the victims of situational couple violence. Furthermore, he found that relationship violence was more likely to escalate in couples experiencing intimate terrorism compared to couples experiencing situational couple violence.

Recent research has examined violence experienced in general population samples, which are most likely to be experiencing situational couple violence. Using the 2001 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a general sample of 18,761 couples ages 18-28, Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, and Slatzman (2007) found that reciprocal intimate partner violence was more likely than unilateral violence to result in injury (approximately 28% bilateral vs. 12% unilateral). Furthermore, women perpetrated IPV more frequently in the context of bilateral violence than in unilateral violence. Additionally, although Johnson found that within a sample experiencing intimate terrorism, the perpetrators of unilateral violence were more likely to be men, Whitaker et al. (2007) found that the perpetrators of unilateral violence in their situationally violent sample were more likely to be women (70%).

Findings from these two research programs suggest that the type of couple violence (intimate terrorism vs. situational couple violence) impacts whether or not bilateral or unilateral violence results in more injury and higher levels of IPV. Although Johnson's (2006) work suggests that intimate terrorism, which is generally unilateral, leads to more injury than does situational violence, which is often bilateral, Whitaker et al.'s (2007) research with situationally violent couples suggests that bilateral or reciprocal IPV leads to more injury than does unilateral violence.



Overall, previous research comparing bilateral violence versus unilateral IPV has examined the differences between perpetrators of bilateral versus unilateral IPV (Charles et al., 2011). Researchers have also looked at how bilateral and unilateral violence differs in couples experiencing situational couple violence versus intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2006). Researchers have looked at how bilateral versus unilateral violence differs within a general population (Whitaker et al., 2007). However, no previous studies have looked at the difference between bilateral and unilateral violence within a therapy-seeking population. The current study uses a sample of violent conjoint therapy-seeking couples to learn more about the dynamics of these couples. If, as we expect, couples seeking therapy for high levels of conflict or violence are most likely to be experiencing situational couple violence, we would also expect that couples experiencing bilateral violence would report higher levels of injury. However, if these couples are experiencing intimate terrorism, we would expect unilateral violence to lead to more injury than bilateral violence.

### Theory

This study is informed by conflict theory. Situational couple violence has been explained through the lens of conflict theory (e.g., Whitaker et al., 2007). Conflict theory can explain violence in terms of control, but the definitions of control for intimate terrorism (more likely to be unilateral) vs. situational couple violence (more likely to be bilateral) are quite different. Johnson (1995) discusses this difference by stating that situational couple violence focuses on control of a specific situation while unilateral intimate terrorism is rooted in a need to control the other person by any means necessary. As mentioned earlier, we hypothesize that couples seeking therapy will most likely be experiencing situational couple violence. We use the lens of conflict theory to understand these couples.

One of the main assumptions of conflict theory is rooted in the idea of society's perpetual scarcity of resources and a desire to manage inequality rather than resolve it (Ingoldsby, Smith, & Miller, 2004). This concept may be useful in understanding how bilateral violence may arise from attempts to control a situation. As a couple attempts to manage inequality in their relationship, disagreements may arise. These disagreements could lead to "increasingly coercive interactions that may spiral into violence" (Whitaker et al., 2007, p. 945). Furthermore, as the violence continues it becomes more hostile with reciprocation, which can lead to more violent acts and subsequently greater injury. For example, Whitaker et al. (2007) suggest that within a unilaterally violent couple one partner could hit the other and leave while a bilaterally violent couple may continue to escalate and increase the likelihood of injury, as they are both participants. However, situational couple violence in these bilaterally violent couples may not escalate over time (e.g., beyond the disagreement regarding a specific inequality). Thus, bilateral violence is not necessarily sustained, but has the potential to be more injury provoking than does unilateral violence within the situationally violent relationship.

#### *Purpose*

Little is known about violent couples seeking help from clinicians. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to illuminate the dynamics of couples seeking therapy for IPV. In addition to examining levels of physical aggression and injury in bilaterally vs. unilaterally violent couples, we explored whether the two types of couples differed in jealousy, psychological aggression and relationship satisfaction.

We were also interested in understanding whether injury, jealousy, psychological aggression and relationship satisfaction vary depending upon whether the violence is bilateral or unilateral. Results from this research can help clinicians better understand the dynamics of

different types of violent couples that they may encounter, and to adapt their therapeutic approach to best serve each type of violent couple.

### *Hypotheses*

We hypothesized that in these voluntary therapy-seeking couples experiencing IPV there would be more bilateral violence than unilateral violence. This prediction was based on Whitaker et al. (2007) finding that bilateral violence was found more frequently in general samples than domestic violence agency samples. Although this sample was seeking therapy, they were not court-ordered. The second hypothesis was that those experiencing bilateral violence compared to those experiencing unilateral violence would experience higher levels of physical aggression and injury as explained by conflict theory. Furthermore, we hypothesized that female partners would perpetrate higher levels of physical aggression and would cause more injury than male partners, based on the findings of Whitaker et al. (2007) study. The third and final hypothesis, based on conflict theory, was that there would be more jealousy and psychological aggression and less relationship satisfaction in bilaterally violent couples than in unilaterally violent couples seeking therapy.

### Method

#### *Participants*

Participants consisted of 129 couples that were screened for a conjoint treatment program for violence or high levels of conflict (Domestic Violence Focused Couples Treatment) (Stith, Rosen, McCollum, & Thomsen, 2004). Couples who had extremely high levels of violence, no violence, ongoing substance abuse or serious mental health issues were excluded from the treatment program, but they remained in this sample. That is, this sample includes all couples that completed the preliminary questionnaires, regardless of whether they ultimately began or

completed the treatment program. Therefore, this sample represents couples seeking treatment, not necessarily couples participating in or completing treatment.

The mean age of the males and females were 36 and 34, respectively. Over two-thirds were either Caucasian or African American (for men, 40% Caucasian, 37% African American; for women, 54% Caucasian, 22% African American). The majority of men and women reported at least some college (57% of men, 78% of women), and most were employed outside of the home (87% of men, 73% of women).

### *Measures*

The psychological aggression (8 items), physical assault (12 items), and injury (6 items) subscales of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2: Straus, Hamby, Bony-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) were used to assess IPV in the past twelve months. Seven of the twelve items in the physical assault subscale assessed severe physical violence (using a knife, punching with something that could hurt, choking, slamming a partner against a wall, beating up, burning, kicking); the other five items assessed milder forms of physical violence. Although each member of the couple reported on both IPV perpetration and victimization, only victimization ratings were used in the present study because self-reports of victimization tend to be more accurate than self-reports of perpetration. Thus, to determine whether a male had been violent, we relied on his wife's report, and vice versa. Each item was rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*no, this has never happened*) to 6 (*more than 20 times*), and ratings of the items comprising each subscale were summed to create total subscale scores. The subscales exhibited acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient for psychological aggression of .77 (males); .74 (females); for physical assault of .85 (males); .90 (females); and for injury of .72 (males); .55 (females).

Current marital satisfaction was assessed with the 3-item Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS; Schumm, Nichols, Schectman, & Grigsby, 1983). Questions include, “How satisfied are you with your relationship”, “How satisfied are you with your relationship with your partner”, and “How satisfied are you with your partner as a partner”? Responses were made on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*extremely dissatisfied*) to 7 (*extremely satisfied*), and were summed to compute a total KMS score (Cronbach’s alpha = .93 males; .96 females).

The 6-item Relationship Jealousy Scale (RJS; White, 1981) was used to assess levels of jealousy in the current relationship. The scale measures an individual’s own sense of being jealous or not jealous in their relationship. An example question is: “How intense are your feelings of jealousy in your current relationship?” Item ratings were made on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all jealous*) to 7 (*very jealous*), and were summed to compute total RJS scores (Cronbach’s alpha = .90 males; .90 females).

### *Procedure*

Married or cohabiting couples who were experiencing relationship violence or high levels of relationship conflict were recruited for a study involving couple therapy. Couples were drawn from a variety of sources. Some couples responded to advertisements in local papers offering free or low-cost couple counseling for couples in conflictual relationships, while others were referred by local domestic violence treatment providers, therapists, or lawyers. All clients participated in therapy voluntarily, and were not court-ordered.

Prior to collecting data, the planned protocol and procedure was approved by the university institutional review board. Upon the participant’s arrival, the male and female partners were separated while they signed an Informed Consent Statement, were interviewed and completed all instruments. The initial assessment included questions for exclusion criteria such

as: reports of no violence, high levels of violence (e.g., previous use of a weapon in a violent conflict), any fear by a partner that conjoint therapy may escalate ongoing violence, ongoing substance abuse, or inability to communicate in English. Couples that met treatment criteria were invited to participate in the program, whereas those who did not meet the criteria were referred elsewhere (e.g., batterer treatment programs or individual therapy). Each individual that participated in the assessment underwent a debriefing process. If both partners completed the assessment, their assessment information was included in this study regardless of whether they participated in or completed treatment.

### Results

Men were more likely than women to perpetrate physical aggression. Based on partner reports, 90% of men (116/129) and 78% of women (101/129) had perpetrated any physical aggression, and 70% of men (90/129) and 45% of women (57/128) had engaged in severe physical aggression. When physical aggression perpetration by both partners was considered simultaneously, most couples (74%) exhibited bilateral aggression. The remainder exhibited unilateral aggression (21%; 16% male-perpetrated, 5% female-perpetrated) or no aggression (5%). If only severe physical aggression perpetration was considered, 36% of couples exhibited severe bilateral aggression, 33% exhibited severe unilateral male aggression, 9% exhibited severe unilateral female aggression, and 22% reported no severe physical violence by either partner.

When these calculations were made based on self-reports, instead of partner reports, we found less overall violence with 78% of men and 73% of women reporting themselves as physically violent toward their partner. We also found a lower report of bilateral violence (64%)

and male only violence (15%). These self-report calculations indicate less violence, which therefore, increased justification for the use of partner reports.

### *Physical Aggression and Injury*

A series of t-tests was conducted to compare levels of physical aggression exhibited by men and women, separately for unilaterally and bilaterally violent couples. As can be seen in Table 1, regardless of couple type and regardless of whether IPV was defined as any physical aggression or severe aggression, men generally exhibited higher levels of physical aggression toward their partners than did women.

In addition, we compared levels of physical aggression in bilaterally versus unilaterally violent couples, separately for men and women (see Table 1). Although levels of physical violence were higher in bilaterally violent than in unilaterally violent couples for both men and women, this difference was not statistically significant in all instances. Violent women exhibited significantly more physical violence in bilateral than unilateral couples, but the difference between women's levels of severe violence in bilaterally vs. unilaterally violent couples only approached significance. Violent men in unilaterally vs. bilaterally violent couples did not differ in overall levels of physical aggression; however, levels of severe physical aggression were significantly higher for men in bilaterally violent couples than for those in unilaterally violent couples.

To compare injuries among men and women in unilaterally vs. bilaterally violent relationships, a parallel series of t-tests was conducted. Results are provided in Table 2. In both unilaterally and bilaterally violent couples, there were significantly more injuries of females (by males) than of males (by females).

Injuries of males by their female partners were significantly higher in bilaterally violent couples than in female-only violent couples. Men did not report any injuries by women when women were unilaterally violent, but men did report injuries when the couple was bilaterally violent. Thus, in this sample, when the female was unilaterally violent she did not inflict injury, but she did inflict injury if the couple was bilaterally violent. In contrast, injuries of women by their male partners did not differ depending on whether only the male was violent or both partners were violent. Thus, the male inflicted injury and the female injury was high whether it is unilateral male violence or bilateral couple violence.

*Jealousy, Psychological Aggression, and Relationship Satisfaction.*

The next set of analyses examined differences in levels of jealousy, psychological aggression, and relationship satisfaction as a function of couple type and gender. To this end, we conducted a series of 3 (couple type: bilateral/unilateral male/ unilateral female) x 2 (participant gender) analyses of variance (ANOVAs), where the first factor is between-groups and the second is within-groups. All ANOVAs were run twice; once with Couple Type defined using *any physical IPV*, and once with Couple Type defined using *severe physical IPV*. Post hoc comparisons were conducted using the Games-Howell (1976) approach, which is appropriate in cases in which ns and/or variances differ across groups (as they do in the present study).

*Jealousy*

Jealousy levels did not differ for men ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ) versus women ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ),  $F_{\text{Any IPV}}(1, 106) < 1$ ,  $F_{\text{Severe IPV}}(1, 89) = 1.20$ , *n.s.* However, jealousy did differ by Couple Type. Although this effect only approached significance when any physical aggression was measured ( $F[2, 106] = 2.72$ ,  $p < .07$ ), it was statistically significant when severe physical aggression was measured ( $F[2, 89] = 3.64$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Post hoc comparisons



based on severe physical aggression revealed that jealousy levels (across partners) were significantly higher in reciprocally violent couples ( $M = 3.04$ ) than in female-violent couples ( $M = 2.14$ ). Jealousy levels in male-violent couples were intermediate ( $M = 2.76$ ), and did not significantly differ from either of the other types of couples. The Couple Type by Sex interaction was not significant in either analysis,  $F_{\text{Any IPV}}(2, 106) = 1.50$ ,  $F_{\text{Severe IPV}}(2, 89) < 1$ , *n.s.*

### *Psychological Aggression*

Regardless of whether any physical aggression or severe physical aggression was measured, males exhibited higher levels of psychological aggression than did their female partners (for any IPV,  $M_{\text{males}} = 21.43$ ,  $M_{\text{females}} = 16.94$ ,  $F(1, 119) = 12.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ; for severe IPV,  $M_{\text{males}} = 22.66$ ,  $M_{\text{females}} = 17.71$ ,  $F(1, 89) = 5.77$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The main effect of Couple Type was also significant in both analyses,  $F_{\text{any IPV}}(2, 119) = 5.87$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $F_{\text{Severe IPV}}(2, 89) = 8.01$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, in both analyses these main effects were modified by significant Couple Type by Sex interactions,  $F_{\text{any IPV}}(2, 119) = 6.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ;  $F_{\text{Severe IPV}}(2, 89) = 6.15$ ,  $p < .01$ . Follow-up simple effects analyses compared levels of male and female psychological aggression within each type of couple. Results were the same regardless of whether any physical aggression or severe physical aggression was measured. In each case, men displayed significantly higher levels of psychological aggression than women in male-violent couples and in bilaterally violent couples but not in female-violent couples (see Table 3).

### *Relationship Satisfaction*

Overall, men were more satisfied than women with their relationships. This difference was significant for both any physical aggression ( $M_{\text{males}} = 13.08$ ,  $M_{\text{females}} = 10.66$ ;  $F[1, 114] = 6.82$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and severe physical aggression ( $M_{\text{males}} = 12.94$ ,  $M_{\text{females}} = 10.41$ ;  $F[1, 93] = 19.03$ ,

$p < .001$ ). The main effect of Couple Type was not significant regardless of whether any physical aggression or severe physical aggression was measured, although it approached significance when couple type was based on severe physical aggression,  $F_{\text{any IPV}} (1, 114) < 1$ ,  $F_{\text{Severe IPV}} (1, 93) = 2.71, p < .10$ . The trend, in the severe physical aggression case, was for satisfaction to be highest in the couples where only the female was physically aggressive ( $M = 13.55$ ), followed by couples where only the male was physically aggressive ( $M = 12.10$ ), and then bilaterally violent couples ( $M = 10.78$ ). The interaction of Couple Type by Sex did not approach significance in either analysis ( $F_s < 1, n.s.$ ).

### Discussion

The aim of the present study was to answer several questions about couples experiencing IPV that are seeking treatment from clinicians. Our first hypothesis, that these therapy-seeking violent couples would experience more bilateral than unilateral violence was supported. Consistent with the results of Whitaker et al. (2007), we found that our sample seemed to be experiencing situational couple violence. We base this conclusion on the finding that most of the couples experienced bilateral violence and that those experiencing bilateral violence experienced more injury than those experiencing unilateral violence. If the couples in our study had been experiencing intimate terrorism we would have expected a higher level of unilateral violence, and that those experiencing unilateral violence would have experienced the most injury. Although it is possible that some couples in our sample were experiencing intimate terrorism, it appears that situational couple violence was more common among these therapy seeking couples. According to conflict theory, couples experiencing situational violence should be more likely to come to couples therapy because aggression is a shared problem within the couple.

The one distinctive difference between our results and those of Whitaker et al. (2007) is that we found that unilaterally violent perpetrators were more likely to be men than women. This finding may have resulted from the fact that some of the clients were referred from lawyers or domestic violence programs working with male offenders.

The second hypothesis -- that those experiencing bilateral violence would experience higher levels of physical aggression and injury than those experiencing unilateral violence -- was generally supported. Females who were bilaterally violent used higher levels of any physical violence and were more likely to cause injury than did females in unilaterally violent relationships, however, they were not significantly more likely to use severe violence than were those in unilaterally violent relationships. One possible explanation for the lack of significant findings for women in bilateral versus unilaterally violent relationships may result from their low levels of use of severe violence. Males who were bilaterally severely violent used higher levels of severe violence than did males who were unilaterally severely violent, however they were not more likely to use any physical violence or to cause injury to their partner than were males who were unilaterally violent. One possible explanation for the lack of significant findings comparing unilaterally versus bilaterally violent men, may result from their higher use of any physical violence in both groups and their higher levels of injury perpetration in both groups.

Overall, consistent with the findings of Whitaker et al. (2007) we found that bilateral violence produced higher levels of violence. We also found that bilaterally aggressive couples experienced higher levels of severe violence than did unilaterally violent couples. Conflict theory supports this hypothesis as conflict easily escalates. The more escalation, the more likely the men and women were to 'up the ante' and subsequently generate injury. There were also gender differences in violence, with men using more severe violence and producing more

injuries overall, than women. Female unilateral violence did not produce injury, whereas male unilateral violence did produce injury. Nonetheless, bilateral violence produced the highest levels of violence and injury in this therapy-seeking sample.

Furthermore, we found additional gender differences. In contrast with Whitaker et al. (2007) findings that females used more violence, we found that men in this sample were more physically violent and more psychologically aggressive. It was also found that men were more satisfied in their relationships. Men and women did not differ in their levels of jealousy. The finding of men being more satisfied in the relationship and using more psychological aggression than women is consistent with previous findings in the literature (e.g., DeMaris, 2010). However, the finding that men and women did not differ in levels of jealousy may be a new illumination about these therapy seeking couples found in the general population. It is speculated that this lack of gender difference in jealousy may be explained by conflict theory. The situational couple violence is a result of a conflict rather than the overarching sense of power and control that would be found in couples of intimate terrorism.

The third and final hypothesis was that there would be more jealousy and psychological aggression and less relationship satisfaction in bilaterally violent couples than in unilaterally violent couples coming to therapy. This hypothesis was supported when severe violence was measured, but only partially supported when any physical violence was measured. Jealousy levels were higher in bilaterally violent couples than in unilaterally violent couples. However, only in severely physically violent couples was psychological aggression found to be significantly higher in bilaterally violent than in unilaterally violent couples. Finally, overall relationship satisfaction did not differ across type of couple. However when considering couples experiencing severe physical violence, relationship satisfaction was higher in unilaterally severe

than in bilaterally severe physically violent relationships. We offer an explanation for this with our results that those experiencing bilateral physical violence experience more injury, more jealousy, and more psychological aggression, as previously explained by conflict theory, which may contribute to lower relationship satisfaction.

One of the primary goals of this paper was to understand which type of violence reported by couples seeking conjoint therapy is the most dangerous. From the present data, we conclude that among couples experiencing situational couple violence **bilaterally violent couples pose the greatest danger**. However, it is likely that unilaterally violent intimate terrorist might pose even more danger than either type of situationally violent couple. Future research should examine unilaterally and bilaterally violent individuals seeking batterer treatment. We also note that, contrary to Whitaker et al.'s (2007) finding with young adults, men in this sample of married or cohabiting couples exhibited higher levels of IPV than did women.

#### Implications

The results of this study have implications for clinicians treating violent couples. It is important, first, for clinicians to assess for violence, as it has been found to be prevalent in therapy-seeking couples. Couples that are coming in for therapy should be assessed for bilateral violence, as well as unilateral violence. It should not be assumed that bilaterally violent couples are less dangerous. Furthermore, the finding that men's marital satisfaction is higher than women's does not necessarily mean that men are not experiencing violence in their relationships. This finding suggests that therapists should assess for violence despite reports of satisfaction. This is especially pertinent in checking for bilateral violence, as men report greater satisfaction than women, as well as greater perpetration of violence in these couples.

Conflict theory offers a guide to understanding effective help for those that are bilaterally violent. Because escalating conflict produces more injury and danger, de-escalation techniques could potentially reduce violence within the relationship. It is also proposed that the therapist not take 'sides' or imply one person is right in bilaterally violent couples, as that can feed the idea from conflict theory that winning is more important than maintaining the relationship (Ingoldsby et al., 2004).

Furthermore, these findings indicate that both partners need to be given tools for resolving conflict nonviolently. In this study we found that couples where both partners are violent experience more injury and higher levels of violence. As a result, only treating one partner could be detrimental to both individuals in the relationship. Therefore, either couple treatment or individual treatment that focuses on teaching nonviolent skills could be beneficial for both partners.

#### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

One limitation of this study is in the sample. This sample is not necessarily a representative sample of couples coming to therapy. These couples came to therapy for a particular program advertised for high conflict or violent couples. Those working in the community also knew of the program and its domestic violence focus, and thus violent couples were referred to the program. The sample consisted of all couples that sought conjoint therapy, but they represent higher levels of violence than would be observed in the standard clinic intakes.

Another limitation was in the CTS2 as a measure. Although the CTS2 is the most commonly used measure for IPV, it does not address the context of the violence. Therefore, we are unable to determine when violence was self-defense or who initiated the violence. Additionally, this study lacks a measure of control and fear, which would be necessary to

indicate intimate terrorism. Without this measure there is no way of knowing for certain whether or not some of these couples are experiencing intimate terrorism.

There is little previous research on therapy-seeking violent couples, and more research on the topic is necessary. We need to know more about the general population of violent couples that come to couples therapy. Knowing more about this population will provide further suggestions for clinical treatments. There is also a need for more qualitative research on these therapy-seeking violent couples. Qualitative research will provide more information about the process and context of the violence and relationship dynamics, which will provide a foundation for further research. Qualitative research will more specifically help to illuminate the meaning of the violence, gender differences in how men and women use violence, who initiates the violence, and whether the violence is related to self-defense. This information will not only provide further information on the actual violence, but could also provide greater information on the dynamics associated with violence such as jealousy, psychological aggression and relationship satisfaction.

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Table 1. Mean physical aggression by couple type and partner sex

Couple type	Perpetrator sex				(df) t-test <sup>c</sup>
	Female		Male		
	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	
Any physical violence					
<b>Unilateral (<i>n</i> = 27)<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>2.17</b>	<b>(1.17)</b>	<b>12.24</b>	<b>(9.91)</b>	<b>(21.8) -4.55***</b>
<b>Bilateral (<i>n</i> = 95)</b>	<b>10.40</b>	<b>(9.07)</b>	<b>16.60</b>	<b>(14.19)</b>	<b>(94) -4.17***</b>
(df) t-test <sup>d</sup>	<b>(65.2) -7.87***</b>		<b>(114) -1.34</b>		
Severe physical violence					
Unilateral ( <i>n</i> = 54) <sup>b</sup>	8.73	(7.03)	<b>16.07</b>	<b>(12.02)</b>	(52) -1.93
<b>Bilateral (<i>n</i> = 46)</b>	<b>14.59</b>	<b>(10.43)</b>	<b>22.43</b>	<b>(14.24)</b>	<b>(45) -3.32**</b>
(df) t-test <sup>d</sup>	<b>(55) -1.76</b>		<b>(87) -2.27*</b>		

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

Note. <sup>a</sup> 21 male unilateral, 6 female unilateral; <sup>b</sup> 43 male unilateral, 11 female unilateral; <sup>c</sup> testing for sex differences within couple type; <sup>d</sup> testing for couple type differences within sex.

Table 2. Mean injury by couple type and partner sex

Couple type	Perpetrator sex				(df) t-test <sup>c</sup>
	Female		Male		
	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	
Any physical aggression					
<b>Unilateral (<i>n</i> = 27)<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>.00</b>	<b>(.00)</b>	<b>3.81</b>	<b>(3.41)</b>	<b>(20) -5.11***</b>
<b>Bilateral (<i>n</i> = 95)</b>	<b>2.28</b>	<b>(2.96)</b>	<b>5.14</b>	<b>(6.05)</b>	<b>(94) -5.36***</b>
(df) t-test <sup>d</sup>	<b>(94) -7.53***</b>		(114) -0.97		
Severe physical aggression					
<b>Unilateral (<i>n</i> = 54)<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>1.18</b>	<b>(1.33)</b>	<b>4.74</b>	<b>(4.54)</b>	<b>(50.9) -4.46***</b>
<b>Bilateral (<i>n</i> = 46)</b>	<b>3.24</b>	<b>(3.35)</b>	<b>7.09</b>	<b>(6.91)</b>	<b>(45) -4.58***</b>
(df) t-test <sup>d</sup>	<b>(41.9) -3.24**</b>		(87) -1.88		

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

Note. <sup>a</sup> 21 male unilateral, 6 female unilateral; <sup>b</sup> 43 male unilateral, 11 female unilateral; <sup>c</sup> testing for sex differences within couple type; <sup>d</sup> testing for couple type differences within sex.

Table 3. Mean psychological aggression by couple type and partner sex

Couple type	Perpetrator sex			
	Female		Male	
	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )
Any physical aggression				
Unilateral female ( <i>n</i> = 6)	13.83 <sup>a</sup>	(3.06)	15.17 <sup>a</sup>	(5.31)
<b>Unilateral male (<i>n</i> = 21)</b>	<b>9.29<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>(6.17)</b>	<b>20.62<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>(8.97)</b>
Bilateral ( <i>n</i> = 95)	<b>18.83<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>(8.40)</b>	<b>22.00<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>(10.07)</b>
Severe physical aggression				
<b>Unilateral female (<i>n</i> = 11)</b>	<b>18.45<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>(10.45)</b>	<b>14.73<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>(5.39)</b>
Unilateral male ( <i>n</i> = 43)	<b>13.98<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>(7.03)</b>	<b>21.46<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>(8.96)</b>
Bilateral ( <i>n</i> = 46)	<b>21.02<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>(8.61)</b>	<b>25.67<sup>b</sup></b>	<b>(10.18)</b>

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

Note. <sup>a</sup> 21 male unilateral, 6 female unilateral; <sup>b</sup> 43 male unilateral, 11 female unilateral; within rows, means with different subscripts differ significantly ( $p < .05$ )