

Intimate Partner Aggression—What Have We Learned? : Comment on Archer (2000)

By: Jacquelyn W. White, Paige Hall Smith, Mary P. Koss, and A. J. Figueredo

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Abstract:

Archer's work (2000) is a meta-analysis of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979) that provides a summary of what has been learned from applications of this instrument, especially with adolescents and young adults in dating rather than long-term relationships. He concluded that more women than men self-report physical aggression toward a partner, although a higher proportion of those injured and receiving medical attention are women. A meta-analysis can be viewed as comprising three stages: primary—the level of the original data in the component studies, secondary—the formal meta-analysis, and tertiary—the level of interpretation of the results. Although the author is not responsible for the flaws in the available studies, he must frame the conclusions within the constraints identified in the primary data because nothing in meta-analysis neutralizes them. We conclude that Archer's work falls short at all three stages. This commentary outlines our concerns regarding (a) the two conflicting viewpoints about intimate partner violence that ground the work; (b) the conceptualization and operational definitions of the constructs of aggression, violence, physical assault, and harm assessment; (c) fundamental and common methodological limitations of the studies included in the meta-analysis that should have tempered interpretation of the findings; and (d) issues of generalizability of the results. We conclude by elaborating a broader context supporting the gendered nature of intimate violence within which the research questions could be profitably studied.

Article:

Conceptualization of the Theoretical Paradigms

Archer's (2000) stated objective was to bring some resolution to what he termed “two conflicting viewpoints about partner violence” (p. 651), feminist theory and family conflict theory including the social learning perspective. He suggested that the former predicts that men would be more aggressive (male directed), whereas conflict theory predicts no sex differences (mutual combat) and raises the possibility that women might be more physically aggressive than men (female directed). Although Archer desired to establish a dichotomy that he could resolve through meta-analysis, it is a false one. Feminist and family conflict theories of intimate partner violence are not necessarily contradictory, and the multicausal nature of violence against women is widely recognized (see Crowell & Burgess, 1996; Koss et al., 1994). Most feminist scholars, especially those in the behavioral sciences, use the principles of social learning theory to account for how sociocultural values are transmitted and learned at the individual level and to describe how individual women may come to behave in gender-atypical ways (see White & Kowalski, 1994). Feminist evolutionary theorists generally recognize that much of this social learning is biologically prepared as a result of gene-culture coevolution and not entirely due to pure cultural transmission. They have described a variety of circumstances in which patriarchy has either evolved or not evolved as an environmentally contingent social system (Hrdy, 1981, 1986; Smuts, 1992, 1995).

Archer's past contributions to this field and his short discussion of age and relationship influences on the magnitude of sex differences in aggression (Archer, 2000, p. 653) demonstrate that he appreciates these inherent complexities. However, the reader not familiar with the issues may fail to grasp them from this presentation. Feminist theory is presented as singular when in fact there are many feminist positions, each with a different

epistemological base. For example, there is the female-defense-against-male-aggression position, which argues that given the right circumstances, women can be just as aggressive as men. Also, there are theories not usually considered under the feminist rubric that likewise consider the role of gender in intimate violence, including developmental theory and evolutionary theory. Similar to the version of feminist theory used by Archer, both evolutionary theory (Daly & Wilson, 1988a) and developmental theory (Crick, 1997; White & Bondurant, 1996) predict greater male aggression. Archer is correct that many western feminists regard “partner violence as a consequence of patriarchy” (p. 651), but we point out that this position does not preclude the argument that patriarchy is also at the root of female aggression (Lerner, 1997; Muehlenhard, 1998; White & Kowalski, 1994).

Definition of Terms

Aggression

By referring to all use of force between partners as aggression, Archer (2000) implied to the general reader that men and women are both engaging in the initiation of hostilities with equal likelihood. Common sense suggests that a different term should be applied to violent acts that are made in self-defense against an aggressor. For example, in international politics, the aggressor is specifically the party that initiates a violent conflict; the party that fights back is never referred to as an aggressor. *Webster's New World Dictionary* (1991) defines aggressor as “a person, nation, etc that is guilty of aggression, or makes an unprovoked attack” (p. 25), and aggression is defined as “an unprovoked or warlike act” and “starting fights or quarrels” (p. 25). Indeed, a number of aggression researchers have suggested different terms for various types of aggression, such as proactive and reactive (Dodge & Coie, 1987) and instrumental and hostile (Feshbach, 1970; see Zillmann, 1979, chapter 1, for a detailed discussion of definitions of aggression).

Violence

We question Archer's (2000) decision to apply the term aggression to refer to assaults without injury and to limit the term violence only to those assaults that result in one and only one consequence, observable physical injury. The usage adds a systematic bias to the study by predetermining and limiting the range of consequences that identify violence. Furthermore, it weakens the conceptualization of violence by including only negative states that are easily and physically observable, acute, and/or bounded in time. By extension, this excludes negative states that are manifested socially, mentally, or emotionally; of a chronic or continuous nature; and/or not described in terms of common time units (i.e., minute, hour, day), such as battering (Smith, Earp, & DeVellis, 1995; Smith, Smith & Earp, 1999), patriarchal terrorism (Johnson, 1995), or psychological abuse. Archer's conceptualization also makes it easy to ignore differences in the social meanings attached to the use of force. Women may subjectively fear death or serious injury when pinned down by men, who are on average larger, stronger, and heavier, whereas men on the basis of their size advantage may not fear harm until much more escalated levels of force are applied to them. Limiting the conceptualization of violence to injury discounts women's perspectives. In their surveillance of violence against women, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention do not limit their definition of violence to acts that resulted in injuries (Peterson, Saltzman, Goodwin, & Spitz, 1998).

Physical Assault

Most of the empirical studies available to Archer (2000) used the CTS, meaning for all practical purposes that he was limited to the conceptualization and operationalization of physical assault that underpins that measure. However, several issues must be addressed to assess whether the meta-analysis could achieve its stated aim of examining sex differences.

First, data from the CTS are typically not reported separately for mild and severe forms of aggression. Although it would probably not be practical or even desirable to include all forms of intimate partner violence in one meta-analysis without specifying a variety of moderator variables, it is important to acknowledge that the minor

and severe forms of aggression not measured by the CTS are potentially part of the fabric of intimate relationships within which the measured items are embedded.

Second, many other possible modes of expressing aggression in intimate relationships are unrepresented in the CTS. For example, women appear to be more likely than men to use indirect methods of aggression, such as sabotaging another's performance (Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, & Peltonen, 1988). Cross-cultural research too has identified an extraordinary range of harm-doing behaviors committed by women. Burbank (1987) documented eight categories of aggressive acts in 317 societies in the Human Relations Area Files. Although her data were limited to female aggression directed toward other adults in the context of home or neighborhood (what she labeled "domestic aggression"), a great deal of aggression was recorded. The behaviors studied included verbal, nonverbal, and physical aggression; passive-aggressive behaviors (i.e., nonperformance of duties); property damage; and locking someone out of the house. Similarly, acts of aggression used by men other than physical assault are underrepresented by the CTS. These include threatening to hurt his partner economically or socially, humiliating her, isolating her from outside activities, controlling what she does and who she sees, threatening to take her children away, defining gender roles in ways that maintain his authority within the relationship and family, preventing her from getting or keeping a job, making her ask for money, taking her money, and/or not letting her have access to family resources (Pence & Paymar, 1993).

Third is the exclusion of studies that included sexual aggression (with the possible exception of Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Archer (2000) excluded sexual aggression on the grounds that there are too few studies examining sex differences, although the few studies available indicate strong sex differences in the direction of more male perpetration (Ryan, 1998; Sorenson & Siegel, 1992; Straus, et al., 1996). The exclusion of sexual aggression systematically biases the database on sex differences because according to the FBI, 99% of rape perpetrators are men (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994). Sexual aggression in women is generally confined to verbal rather than physical coercion (Shea, 1998). A meta-analysis including sexual assault data would clearly detect a very strong sex effect in the male direction. Additionally, excluding sexual acts from the conceptualization of assault is artificial because both occur in intimate relationships and may occur together in the same incidents (see, e.g., Smith, Edwards, & DeVellis, 1998; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998).

Thus, we argue that various forms of aggression and abuse that are not measured by the CTS provide a much-needed context for the interpretation of findings from the CTS. Because this issue is not acknowledged in the meta-analysis, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the relative frequency or severity of the physical aggression used by men and women, much less the reasons or circumstances that lead to the aggression or the meaning of that aggression to the victim or perpetrator. Thus, although we think it is important to examine all types of aggression used by partners, we do not suggest lumping all forms together. It would be important to address the question of gender-related patterns as a function of type and severity, treating these as moderator variables. In defense of Archer (2000), given how data typically are reported, it would not have been possible for him to either do separate meta-analyses for mild and serious forms of aggression or use severity as a moderator variable.

Limitations in the Studies Composing the Database

Archer (2000) offered two hypotheses that might account for the differences between the feminist and family conflict theoretical positions: (a) act-based measures consider acts out of context and neglect their consequences, and (b) the samples selected by the two types of researchers are very different. We think he reasoned that family conflict researchers find no sex differences because they use decontextualized, act-based measures in general populations, whereas feminist researchers assess partner violence more contextually within samples of victims and perpetrators of domestic assault. We offer our assessment of these two hypotheses and the likelihood that relevant support for them could come from the meta-analysis by discussing contextual validity, harm assessment, and sampling and generalizability.

Contextual Validity

We suggest that the first hypothesis, that act-based measures consider acts out of context, could not be addressed directly with the studies included in the meta-analysis because most of them used the CTS. The CTS collects frequency data on acts of violence and does not assess the acts' meaning to either victims or perpetrators, whether the acts themselves are independent of or embedded within an ongoing pattern of other abusive acts, if they are connected to underlying power imbalances, and whether their directionality was preemptive or in self-defense. We agree with Archer's (1999) own suggestions in a recently published reliability study of the CTS that the field must focus on identifying the contextual factors that shape the motives, meaning, and consequences of physical assault for men and women. We would extend his suggestions for study of contextual issues to include how physical violence connects to other aspects and types of intimate partner violence, including battering, sexual violence, psychological terrorism, and economic and social disempowerment and marginalization. Also, various relationship factors, including stress, conflict, and communication patterns, as well as status or power differences between the woman and her male partner, alter the meaning of a partner's aggression. There is a rich developmental literature that shows gender-related patterns in the understanding and use of various types of aggressive behavior (Archer & Parker, 1994; Crick, 1997; Crick, Bigbee, & Howes, 1996; Crick, Casas, & Ku, 1999). Research, including Archer's own work (Archer & Haigh, 1999), has documented that women and men have different understandings of anger and aggression. For example, A. Campbell, Muncer, Guy, and Banim (1996) documented that men see anger expression as a means of reasserting control over a situation, whereas women see anger expression as a loss of control. They found that men perceive women's aggression as expressive and women judge men's aggression to be instrumental. Apparently, women and men share the belief that his aggression is a means of control and hers is a sign of loss of control. However, because men are typically stronger and more likely to have experience with weapons, they risk doing serious harm to their partners. Women who hit may not expect to really harm or injure their partner but rather want to let them know how upset they are about something. These patterns are particularly likely in relationships that are male-dominant and where the couples do not agree on the appropriateness of the power imbalance (Coleman & Straus, 1986). Both men and women in husband-dominant relationships reported experiencing more partner verbal aggression (insulting, swearing, stomping) and threatening use of a weapon (Tang, 1999). The behaviors women in husband-dominant relationships reported more often using were sulking, refusal to talk, spiteful behavior, throwing, or kicking. Both husbands and wives used more violence when the husband perceived that he had less power (Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 1999). Wives' use of violence also was associated with a husband demand/wife withdraw interactional style. Magdol et al. (1997) found that more women than men reported higher violence on the CTS but argued that engaging in violence toward a partner is a more significant violation of a gender norm for men than it is for women.

Thus, there is an important gender story, but it goes beyond differences in frequency. It concerns how any specific behavior is seen or evaluated. It will be essential in future research to study the interaction of power imbalance, conflict, and the dynamics of ongoing partner violence to determine the different meanings of aggression for women and men. Furthermore, these partner characteristics must be understood within a larger context of race, ethnicity, class, and culture. Few of the theoretical positions developed to date have been tested in diverse settings or applied directly to nonwestern cultures. An exception is Richie's (1996) gender entrapment theoretical paradigm that links culturally constructed gender-identity development with racism and violence against women to more fully understand women's involvement in crime.

Harm Assessment

In addition to lack of context information, Archer's (2000) first hypothesis also attributed differences in feminist and conflict theory to act-based use of measures that ignore consequences of assault. We agree with his position but question his decision to limit measurement of consequences to whether physical injury occurred and whether medical treatment was necessary. We are also concerned about implications of the way in which the CTS is scaled.

Assessment of harm based on frequency data

It is a mistake to infer severity of injury from the frequency of injury or to conclude that no physical injury requiring medical attention signifies no consequences of the violence. There are many known consequences of physical assault that go beyond immediate physical trauma necessitating medical care. Although most of the research on consequences is cross-sectional, thus demonstrating correlational rather than causal relationships, the results do suggest that after controlling for other relevant variables, abuse is strongly associated with poor health and social outcomes. These include harm to psychological, reproductive, and ongoing physical health; unsafe health practices; increased medical utilization; and adverse behavioral outcomes like suicide and substance use, as well as social/economic consequences such as access to household resources, decision-making, quality of life for children in the home, and employment patterns (J. C. Campbell & Lewandowski, 1996; Plichta, 1996; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Abused women, relative to nonabused women, have been found to be at higher risk for a range of health problems that are not a direct consequence of physical blows to the body; these include clinical depression, sexually transmitted infection, gastrointestinal disorders, posttraumatic stress disorder, frequent urinary tract and vaginal infections, and decreased perceived health status (A. L. Coker, Smith, Bethea, King, & McKeown, 2000; Gleason, 1993; McCauley et al., 1995; Plichta, 1996; Smith, Edwards, & DeVellis, 1998). Furthermore, the consequences of physical assault go beyond the individual women. Domestic violence influences women's earnings and ability to remain in a job (Browne, Salomon, & Bassuk, 1999), reduces educational attainment and income (Hyman, 1993), and reduces women's participation in public life, lessening their contribution to social and economic development (Carillo, 1992). Children witnessing abuse have many of the same problems as those abused themselves, including more emotional and behavioral problems and more physical health complaints. In 30% to 60% of the families where husbands abuse their wives, the children are also abused (Appel & Holden, 1998; Edleson, 1999). In Nicaragua, children of women who were physically or sexually abused by their partners were 6 times more likely than other children to die before age 5. They were also more likely to be malnourished. Women who were beaten were significantly more likely than nonabused women to have an infant death or pregnancy loss from abortion, miscarriage, or stillbirth (Jejeebhoy, 1998). In India, children of mothers who were beaten received less food than other children (Rao, 1998). Focusing on injuries requiring care is very narrow and is further problematic because violent partners may prevent women from seeking immediate care even when it is needed. This is especially true among rural women, where one of the common forms of domestic violence is denial of access to means of transportation and communication (D. Coker, 1999).

Problems in scaling

General readers may be unaware of the methodological problems inherent in the CTS approach to assessing physical assault including equation of mild and serious acts of violence when total scores are used, reliance on partner report that contributes nonindependent data points to the analyses, and issues of reliability and validity. Archer (1999) reviewed many of these problems. We focus on concerns about scaling. Respondents indicate how often they have received and done each of the discrete acts. In the belief that people are either unable or unwilling to give exact numbers of incidents, the CTS presents respondents with categories for the number of times that a particular event occurred. The kind of scaling generally used is as follows: 1 = *never*, 2 = *1 time*, 3 = *2 times*, 4 = *3–5 times*, 5 = *6–10 times*, 6 = *11–20 times*, and 7 = *over 20 times*. This system of categorical scoring for behavioral frequencies, when used as an interval scale, gives equal weight to the first one or two incidents, the next three incidents, the next four incidents, the next 10 incidents, and any number of subsequent incidents after an arbitrary cutoff. It is therefore biased heavily toward measuring lower levels of aggression and minimizes differences in behavioral rates toward the upper end of the scale. This measurement scale truncates the distribution of violent acts apparently on the implicit theory of time-diminishing psychological significance of ever-higher rates of violent behavior. We need not address the validity of this implicit theory with respect to the relative consequences of moderate versus escalated abuse; the instrument is clearly inadequate at providing very exact quantitative comparisons between different rates of aggressive behavior. The scaling performs the equivalent of a logarithmic transformation on the data, which produces a negatively accelerated function that is not sensitive to anything but massive escalations of aggression. Furthermore, the meta-analysis focused on sex differences in proportion and did not examine sex differences in the mean number of aggressive acts committed

or break down the mean number of minor versus serious forms of aggression. Thus, the meta-analysis cannot directly answer the question of who is more aggressive in terms of frequency and/or severity of aggressive acts.

Sampling and Generalizability

Archer's (2000) second hypothesis states that differences in the feminist and conflict theoretical positions occur because the two camps use different samples. We believe he is incorrect in his general claim that feminist researchers typically limit their studies to samples selected for high levels of partner violence by men such as those from domestic violence shelters. In fact, many feminist researchers, including ourselves, use surveys of large populations (see, e.g., Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987; Merrill et al., 1999; White & Koss, 1991; White, Merrill, & Koss, 1999), health care populations (A. L. Coker, Smith, McKeown, & Remsburg, 2000; Koss, Woodruff, & Koss, 1991), and medical examiner data (Smith, Moracco, & Butts 1998), the same kind of data used by family conflict and criminal justice researchers. However, we are more concerned about inclusion and exclusion criteria that were used, the impartiality with which they were applied, and the handling of outliers. The selection criterion was studies that compared "men and women on measures of physical aggression" (Archer, 2000, p. 654). This criterion is a restatement of what the CTS is used for, and thus it is not surprising that most of the studies in the meta-analysis used the CTS. Many of the samples were based on youth (109 college & 29 high school samples) and reflected courtship violence but not escalated and ongoing violent homes where the consequences of violence are compounded by the presence of children. Only three studies used refuges (i.e., shelters for battered women) as the sampling frame, and only three additional ones sampled couples in which the husband had been referred to counseling for violence. Although the author is apparently concerned with the lack of population representativeness of samples taken from women's refuges, where the preferential attribution is towards male aggression, he does not seem as concerned about the lack of population representativeness of other samples, particularly college undergraduates. Although we ourselves have done many studies among college students, we recognize the importance of not generalizing beyond them. College samples are unrepresentative of the community in general. Although Archer used the proportion female and the mean age as moderator variables, these are not adequate proxies for the many socioeconomic differences between high school, college, and community samples.

We are also concerned about the exclusion criteria. Crime surveys were excluded on the grounds that they cannot be taken as good measures of intimate assault due to the context of street crime in which the questions appear. We ourselves have criticized these surveys for underdetecting sexual and physical assault, which was attributed in part to the context of questioning (Koss, 1993, 1996), but that does not appear to be an adequate basis for excluding the studies. Crime surveys do not ask respondents about acts they have perpetrated, only about acts they have experienced as a victim and the sex of the perpetrator, but nevertheless they identify large sex differences. For example, the National Violence Against Women Survey revealed that in their lifetimes, 7.7% of women had been raped and 22.1% physically assaulted by an intimate partner compared with 0.3% of men who had been raped and 7.4% who had been assaulted (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). On these grounds several of the largest studies, with nationwide scope, sophisticated sampling frames, and repeated measurements across time, were excluded from the meta-analysis. These data sources can by no means be described as feminist, yet they consistently report sex differences. A related concern is the removal of outliers. Among those studies eliminated as outliers on the basis of the *q* statistic, 17 of 26 used noncollege samples, including 4 that were national in scope. It is not unreasonable to suggest some of the studies considered outliers may actually be more scientifically sound.

The joint effects of the inclusion and exclusion criteria were to systematically favor studies of young people reporting small sex differences and disfavor studies of adults in the community where larger sex differences were reported. Archer's (2000) Table 10 identifies some of these excluded data sets and shows that the proportion of female victims in them ranged from .62 to .93. Archer suggested that homicide data may be "more reliable than figures for sublethal assaults because they are less subject to reporting bias" (p. 663). We agree with this assertion, but we must point out that Archer has misrepresented the findings of Daly and Wilson (1988a, 1988b). Although they found as stated that approximately 40% of partner homicides were wives killing

husbands and that these women were initially arrested, virtually all were subsequently released after it was determined that they had acted in self-defense as defined by law. The conclusions of Daly and Wilson are not properly used to support the notion of approximately equal rates of lethal aggression among men and women.

Conclusions

A range of concerns has been raised about Archer's (2000) meta-analysis. At the primary stage, the data available were flawed because they were almost solely based on one instrument that emerged from and perpetuates a weak and incomplete conceptualization of intimate partner violence, equates minor and escalated violent acts, and scales the data in a way that systematically minimizes the differences between men and women. At the secondary level, the sampling frame was disproportionately skewed toward samples of adolescents and college students and toward studies with low levels of aggression, included nonindependent data points, did not weigh studies for scientific soundness, and employed a very narrow measure of harm severity. At the tertiary level, the author failed to attach these limitations to the conclusions.

It is a serious public policy concern for psychologists to endorse a position that men and women are equally violent in relationships. Such a message is harmful in its potential to undermine empathy and public support for the plight of female survivors of male violence and to deflate the momentum of efforts to change the structural conditions that support violence against women. A recent directive issued by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (Lerch, 1999) makes clear that social scientists have a special obligation to consider the policy implications of their work and to exert their best efforts to present findings in a form that maximizes the potential that they will be correctly understood and applied:

First, scientists must be sensitive to the implications of their work for the larger society and take steps to educate their non-scientist readers about the relationship of their work to the broader community. The professional associations as custodians of a discipline's core values and distinct traditions and as publishers of much of the basic knowledge produced by the profession, must assume a leadership role in instituting policies and procedures that enables its members to communicate the findings of controversial research in a way that anticipates its impact on policy, or more generally on the lives of people. (p. 3)

We conclude that it would have been more appropriate to communicate through title and conclusions a narrower, more cautious and nuanced message for the present results.

We believe that the amount of scientific and lay attention given to the question of sex differences in use of physical assault is misplaced and represents something other than our collective attempt to more fully understand partner violence. There have been over 2 decades of scientific, historical, and common-sense criticism of the decontextualized, ahistorical, and simplistic methods that have been used repeatedly to scrutinize the level of women's use of physical assault in intimate relationships. We agree with Archer's (1999) suggestions expressed elsewhere that it is time to move toward better measurement of physical assault that is sensitive to severity, sequencing, and outcomes of acts. A critical point is that even if women were as aggressive as men (a point not yet proven), partner violence is still not a gender-neutral phenomenon. In a society organized socially and psychologically along the lines of gender, aggression and violence among male and female partners are necessarily gendered in the meaning of the experience, motives, provocations, and consequences. Historically, the belief in the nonaggressive female has supported patriarchal values (see White & Kowalski, 1994). On the one hand, the myth of the nonaggressive woman has been used to deny women access to arenas of power where the use of dominance and aggression seem necessary; on the other hand, recognizing female aggression runs the risk of ignoring the real inequalities that exist between women and men and trivializing the violence against women that results in serious injury and death. We conclude that there is merit in garnering appropriately contextualized data on women's aggression following the suggestions we have made throughout the commentary.

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