



MEN AS VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

SOME ISSUES TO CONSIDER

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A Note about Terminology

In Australia, the phrase 'domestic violence' is preferred to its equivalent American term, 'battering'. Similarly, Australians are more familiar with describing the person who commits the violence as the 'perpetrator', rather than the 'batterer' or the 'battering partner'; and the person offended against as the 'victim' rather than, say, the 'battered wife'. However some Australian critics prefer terms like 'men who use violence', and many feminists dislike the term 'victim', which they see as disempowering and objectifying. In this Discussion Paper, unless discussing US research and theory, I use the term 'perpetrator' or phrases like 'behaved violently'. 'Victim' and 'survivor' are used interchangeably, and sometimes together, to refer to people who are experiencing or have suffered domestic violence. This is in order to convey the sense that domestic violence is a process of victimisation, but that people can also survive it and move on with their lives.

The term 'family violence' originated as a concept and approach in the early 1970s in the US. In that country, in contrast to the largely feminist-originated concepts of 'domestic violence' or 'wife battering', the stance on 'family violence' (sometimes more recently described as 'intimate violence in families', e.g. Gelles 1997) regards gender as one variable among many, and often refers to 'spousal violence'. Family violence work focuses on violence as a broader problem that happens among many family members and within broader society, and includes child abuse and corporal punishment. American family violence researchers see the family unit as a whole as being the key unit of analysis and the focus of intervention. In Australia, many Aboriginal people and members of other oppressed and/or minority ethnic communities who are concerned about domestic violence, also prefer the term 'family violence'. This interpretation seems different in some ways from that of American family violence researchers.

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*'Urge feminists . . . to seize this issue and make it our own'*¹

Introduction

It is commonly believed that women are the typical victims/survivors of domestic violence, and that most perpetrators are men. To varying degrees, this view has shaped different stances on and responses to domestic violence as a social problem, in areas ranging from government policy to feminist 'grass roots' campaigns. However in the United States (US) since the late 1970s, and, more prominently in the last few years in several western societies including Australia, this focus on women as the victims of domestic violence has been criticised. Dissenting voices have come, in the main, from two sources. The first might loosely be termed 'men's groups' or organisations belonging broadly to a 'men's movement'. The second emanates from some social science researchers usually affiliated with the field of 'family violence'. These two sources do not hold identical views, but each argues that men, too, can be victims of domestic violence, and that this fact is insufficiently acknowledged in areas like government policy and general public awareness.

This Discussion Paper offers no neat and final answers to the often thorny issues posed by the question of male victims of domestic violence, because this does not seem an appropriate response, at least at this stage. Instead the Paper identifies questions and problems that need considered reflection and further work by people working to end domestic violence. The discussion is broadly informed by a feminist approach, where this stance is understood as not only entailing a basic commitment to ending the existing subordination of women, but also being prepared to risk engaging with unfamiliar and even apparently antagonistic perspectives in an open-minded spirit. It necessarily includes detailed critical analysis of research methodologies that underpin studies claiming that women are as likely as men to be violent in the home. Readers who do not require this level of analysis may like to skip the section headed 'Researching Domestic Violence: Some Concepts'.

¹ Renzetti 1999: 52

Making Claims about Violence

One helpful way to begin is to understand that when people talk or write about violence – whether on television, in a clinical manual, a feminist pamphlet, or over a coffee break at work – they have particular political and personal stakes in the subject matter being discussed, and make what some sociologists call ‘claims’ about it.² These claims may not simply be about the apparent immediate subject of violence, but may be about trying to achieve other goals through the specific way the violence is typified.³ The emotional currency of the topic of violence helps lend weight and persuasiveness to other agendas. So, for example, statements condemning mass shootings may try to promote the cause of gun control.

Seeing the issue of men as victims of domestic violence as a claim can help disentangle what turn out to be several quite different underlying agendas and investments. Each of them must be assessed on its own particular terms. Some claims about male victims belong to the realm of male survivors of violence more broadly, in which men and boys have begun to speak out about their own experiences and to argue that, like female victims/survivors, they deserve to be heard and believed rather than (as still often occurs) marginalised if not downright ignored. These claims can be quite compatible with a feminist understanding of violence. Indeed, some men working in this area are actively pro-feminist in their understanding and activism.

However, claims about male victimisation are also sometimes used to undermine feminist arguments about, and work against, violence against women, and even to attack feminism more generally. This kind of result tends to be associated with the ‘men’s rights’ end of the spectrum of men’s groups, which draws somewhat selectively on an already slanted picture of social science research into family violence. The social science researchers do not themselves necessarily fall into a clear-cut division of simply promoting the interests of male victims or undermining feminism, especially when we keep in mind that the effects of some claims can be unintended. It is probably more helpful for all of us working in the area to rigorously examine the basis of our assumptions about domestic violence and to consider its possible impact on the ways that we think and act in relation to the issue.

² Best 1989, 1990; see also Nelson 1984, Walker 1990

³ Schwartz and DeKeseredy 1993: 250

Claims-making is connected to specific interests in defining a social problem in a particular way; and interests are backed up by resources – powerful ways of authorising statements about the importance and urgency of a particular issue. Resources help to shape who has ownership of the social problem, or the potential to control how it will be defined, and so treated, in society.⁴ In claims about violence, social science research is a crucial resource that needs careful scrutiny. And of course social science researchers have their own diverse interests, which may not neatly coincide with those of other claims-makers who use their research.

This Discussion Paper will argue that it is important to seriously consider the claim that men can be victims of domestic violence, but that the basis for this view must be critically investigated. It will begin by broadly contextualising the relationship of men and boys to violence in general, then move on to consider how domestic violence tends to be defined. This leads to an exploration of some fundamental concepts in research into domestic violence, which form a background from which we can examine specific claims made about men as victims of domestic violence. In assessing these claims, the Paper will give an overview of the kinds of agendas that seem to be at work in claims about men as victims. We will focus particularly on the research that is used to authorise them. This will take us to an assessment of the state of the research field into domestic violence more generally, and some reflection on the differences and challenges within it, focussing particularly on feminist responses to the work of North American family violence researchers Murray Straus and Richard Gelles, and controversies over their use of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) to research domestic violence. We will then explore some of the broader differences between feminist understandings of domestic violence on the one hand, and family violence perspectives on the other.

The discussion concludes by suggesting that, while it is not possible or desirable to smooth out all controversial differences between the two approaches, they can play off each another more productively than has happened to date. In the process this raises some difficult and thought-provoking questions for feminists working against domestic violence. However it also clears a space for legitimising the experiences of men as victims,

whether at the hands of men or women, within a broader feminist framework that never loses sight of the vast backdrop of male violence against women.

Men, Boys and Violence: The Big Picture

When interpersonal violence is conceptualised in popularly understood terms, as involving 'obvious' (particularly physical) force, it is clear that a substantial proportion of victims are men and boys. This violence has two important features that distinguish it from violence against women. The violence is relatively unlikely to be perpetrated by somebody in an intimate relationship with the victim; and it is most likely to be perpetrated by a man.

Violence in a Public Setting

Adult males are much more likely than females to be victimised by someone who is not in an intimate relationship with them – an acquaintance, a workmate or even a stranger. 'Common sense' knowledge about physical assaults (for example, those which get to court, or everyday violence such as that on the sports field, as well as official statistics and crime surveys) shows these gendered differences.⁵ The same pattern exists for the extreme result of physical assault, homicide. A recent Australian study found that only 11 per cent of adult male victims were killed by intimate partners, compared to 60 per cent of women victims.⁶

Even where boys, rather than men, are considered, there is a comparable trend. When boys are sexually abused, the perpetrator is less likely to be a family member than is the case when girls are sexually abused.⁷ Overall, the gender difference is so pronounced that in the public world, as opposed to the home and other more private spaces, males are generally regarded as more at risk from physical violence (which, importantly, excludes sexual assault) than are females. Illustrating with homicide again, Australian research shows that two thirds of victims are male.⁸ When this fact is combined with the much lower chance that a man will be killed by an intimate, it is clear

⁵ For Australian research see for example the analysis by Ferrante et al (1996: 25-26) of Western Australian police records for offences against the person, and Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] (1998: 43-63). On the US see Bachman (1994), Craven (1996), and Rennison and Welchans (2000).

⁶ Mouzos 1999, cited in Bagshaw and Chung 2000: 3

⁷ See, for example, Bolton et al (1989: 45). However, as with research on other forms of sexual assault, data on the sexual abuse of boys generally dispels the myth that boys are most at risk from strangers. The key difference between boys and girls here appears to be that, comparatively, boys are more likely to be at risk from males they know in some way but to whom they are not related.

⁸ Mouzos 1999, cited in Bagshaw and Chung 2000: 3

that men are at greater risk than women from non-intimate homicide.

Many criticisms can be made of the official, usually statistical, research that produces such a conclusion, particularly when we bear in mind the discussion of claims-making in the Introduction. Research is never neutral. There are also important differences *within* the categories of 'men' and 'women'. For example, a man will be much more likely to be a homicide victim if he is Aboriginal, and Aboriginal women are considerably more likely to be killed by intimates than are non-indigenous women.⁹ However, as far as gender in general is concerned, the basic picture seems to be that victims of public and officially visible violence are most likely to be young men.

Violence in the public arena has a much greater chance of coming to the attention of authorities like police, bar staff and hospital personnel, and so of finding its way into official data sources. In addition, those who stress that men are at greater risk of violence than women tend to conceptualise violence as only involving physical assault; and not, for instance, also rape and sexual abuse, which victimise women and girls more often than males, and which are more likely to take place in private.

Violence Perpetrated by Men

This leads to the second major feature of violence patterns. Most perpetrators of violence against men and boys are also male, whether the violence is public or private, and whether it involves a perpetrator who is in an intimate relationship with the victim, a complete stranger, or some other relationship.¹⁰ The qualifier 'most' is an important one, as by any measure it is indisputable that women are more than capable of violence towards both men and boys. In the Australian homicide study, murders by women contributed 11.4 per cent of the total.¹¹ This is a reasonably significant proportion, certainly when compared to, for instance, the percentage of sexual assaults by women.¹² However, even here gendered differences are evident. Women who kill often appear to do so in self-defence, which is less (proportionally) common for male murderers.¹³ Overall, more than half of all the homicides in the Australian homicide study involved men killing other men. While 94 per cent of the killing

⁹ Egger 1997, *Cultural Perspectives* 2000: 15

¹⁰ Mukherjee et al 1997: 25-39

¹¹ Mouzos 1999, cited in Bagshaw and Chung 2000: 3

¹² A recent Australian government survey of women's safety found that 99 per cent of sexual violence against the women was perpetrated by men (ABS 1996a: 6). Egger (1997: 85) cites Salmelainen and Coumelaros' (1993) study of adult sexual assault: males comprise 'virtually all' Australian sexual assault offenders.

¹³ For example, Eastaie 1993: 69-70

14 Mouzos 1999, cited in Bagshaw and Chung 2000: 3

15 For example ABS 1996a: 21, Egger 1997, Bachman 1994, Craven 1996, Greenfield et al 1998, Rennison and Welchans 2000. This also reveals the under-researched relationship between dimensions like private versus public, and intimate (or at least a family member) versus stranger (or at least non-intimate). It is logical to think that, because violence against women is more likely to take place in private by an intimate than is the case for male victims, female victimisation will be less visible in official figures. However, some violence in the home is by strangers (and so is not 'domestic' in conventional understanding), and some public violence is by intimates (and so seems more 'domestic'). 'Public' also seems to imply that the offender is not alone with the victim (with possible implications for reporting, risk and safety). 'Private' suggests the opposite. However there are counter-examples like deserted parks and situations of home violence where there are bystanders. Crime surveys tend not to supply data in sufficiently detailed form to analyse these patterns further (for a partial exception, see ABS 1998: 43-63), let alone compare the experiences of men and women and different social groupings within them. This has implications for violence prevention (see also Egger 1997: 95-96).

16 Once outside the most common scenario of adult male perpetrator and adult
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of women was by male offenders, and the vast majority of these homicides were in the context of an intimate relationship, of the 11 per cent of the men killed by intimate partners, even 16 per cent of these involved a male perpetrator.¹⁴

At this point some readers might object that this is putting the cart before the horse, because it has already been suggested that research results are not neutral – and anyway, assaults by women against men is the issue being explored in this Discussion Paper. For those reasons, perhaps the least controversial form of violence to use as an illustration is homicide. While it is certainly possible for some deaths to be mislabelled, murder and manslaughter do not pose the same 'tip of the iceberg' problem when it comes to estimating 'real' occurrences from official data. The statistical picture is generally less contentious than will become evident for other forms of violence such as assault, including domestic forms. Official homicide data are therefore more likely to construct a picture which can be essentially agreed on by researchers, regardless of method and political values.

In contrast to violence against men, it is now well known that violence against women is far less likely to be in the public domain, and it has more chance of involving an intimate.¹⁵ Consequently, its real extent has to be estimated not from official crime statistics, but from research like victimisation surveys and face-to-face interviews. This work has produced the fairly uncontroversial conclusion, these days, that most violence against women also comes from men. It is however important to emphasise again that this situation describes 'most' but not all violence, as some perpetrators are female; including even in cases of sexual assault against both women and children, where the ratio of female to male perpetrators is probably the lowest of any form of violence.¹⁶

Women's Violence

When violence is broken down into different types, the major counter-example to the male-heavy perpetrator picture appears to be physical abuse of young children (and neglect, if that is to be included as 'violence'). The gender distribution here is often estimated to be about 50-50, or even weighted

more towards the female perpetrator, especially when she is the caregiver. Some people point out that, given that generally women spend a lot more time caring for infants and young girls and boys than do men, this result is not so surprising. There is also a common assumption that women should be more 'naturally' nurturing, meaning that physically abusive mothers are more likely to be targeted by both social policy and research than are their male counterparts.¹⁷ However these qualifications do not negate the fact that women are certainly violent too.

Acknowledging this can pose a challenge for feminism, which wants to publicise and oppose women's victimisation. To date there has not been a great deal of feminist work which has grappled with the idea of women as perpetrators against those who are relatively powerless. One notable exception is the work of feminist historian Linda Gordon, who combines sensitivity to the power relations of gender, class, ethnicity and age with an approach that tries to grasp the way power can operate within intimacy – including shifting and fluctuating in sometimes unexpected ways. Gordon's historical case studies show how in one family a woman could be both victimised by her husband and also abuse her own children; and how, in her relations with welfare workers, she could similarly be both subject to forces beyond her control *and* manage to manipulate the situation to achieve some desirable outcomes for herself.¹⁸ Gordon's approach is an important introduction to the idea that, when it comes to violence, it is possible and perhaps also quite common for a woman to be both victim and perpetrator. To define her as simply powerful or powerless does not do justice to a complex situation. These are important themes to which this Discussion Paper will return.

To summarise then, violence against men seems more likely to be in a public setting and not to involve an intimate, compared to the opposite for women. The situation is more complicated for boys, who in at least some ways have a similar victim profile to that of girls. Most violence, particularly sexual assault, involves male perpetrators, apart from non-sexual violence against children in families, where female perpetrators may even predominate. Of course how violence is defined is also important; although this seems unlikely to change the overall gender trend, even if more specific categories are included, such as violence on the sports field, or homophobic violence. When it

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female victim, estimates of the gender distribution of sexual abuse perpetrators and victims vary. Males appear to comprise about 10 per cent of all Australian sexual assault victims (Egger 1997: 94-95). It would seem logical to conclude that most offenders against males are also male, but the issue of male sexual victimisation, and any differences in offender patterns for men victims compared to boys, is under-researched. The results summarised by Egger are also likely to be underestimates as they are mainly derived from reports to the police. As well, sexual violence from women against other women and children is only beginning to be acknowledged (e.g. Elliott 1993).

¹⁷ Martin 1983, Tomison 1996, Barnett et al 1997: 49, 128, Gelles 1997: 59

¹⁸ Gordon 1988

comes to domestic violence however, any claim to a basic gender pattern is what is at issue in the rest of this Paper.

Defining Domestic Violence

The 'Default' Position

Is it possible for men to be victims of 'domestic violence'? To answer this question we must define domestic violence, and this is where the complexity begins.¹⁹ A common sense of domestic violence tends to imply a man being violent in some way toward a woman with whom he is in an intimate relationship. The meaning of 'intimate relationship' includes the man as husband or de facto partner, and may encompass not only current but also past partnerships, such as a separated or an ex-husband. How established a relationship has to be to qualify as 'intimate' is also variable in definition. Some researchers may include 'dating' relationships, for instance between young people, within the broad category. These kinds of assumptions may be taken for granted, rather than spelled out in the research or policy. It is therefore quite a frequent experience to come across articles, books and policy documents that use the term 'domestic violence', but never actually specify that their operating model is one of an adult male perpetrator and adult female victim in an intimate relationship. This gendered power dynamic, adult heterosexual couple view is what we might call the 'default position' for the view of domestic violence. It operates even when the 'official rules' relevant to domestic violence, that is, the words of the law, are gender neutral. In the current societal context, public consciousness tends to associate 'domestic violence' with (usually physical) violence by a man against a woman.²⁰

Definitions and Research Methods

This way of thinking is already taking us into the area of epistemology, or how we know what we know. Some of those people who believe that most, if not all, domestic violence fits the default position take the view that this truth has been reached by the 'correct' research methods. In contrast, critics of this picture of

¹⁹ MacDonald 1998

²⁰ Whether there is widespread public condemnation of such violence is another issue. Eight per cent of Australians apparently find domestic violence acceptable in some circumstances (Office of the Status of Women [OSW] 1995: 9-10). The domestic violence that is not condoned is more likely to be physical than to take other forms. National research on young people and domestic violence concluded that 92 per cent of young Australians believe domestic violence to be either very or quite serious (National Crime Prevention 2000). While over 80 per cent of people in that study considered threatened or actual physical assault to be domestic violence, percentages were lower for other forms of violence. Many people also did not view it as a common problem. Finally, there can be important differences between attitudes and behaviour. While working on the final draft of this Paper, I encountered a young woman who had been assaulted at my home train stop. I (and it seemed, many other people) wrongly assumed that she knew the man. At least two of the men who assisted her kept emphasising to me that they would have helped earlier but they 'thought it was just boyfriend and girlfriend'.

domestic violence find fault with the knowledge produced, and with the route taken to get there (the methodology).²¹ While the obvious exponents of these latter views are the men's rights and family violence researchers, it is not necessary to profoundly disagree with the default position in order to have some reservations about its portrayal of domestic violence and the epistemology and methodology often associated with it. For instance, some feminists argue that no research is really capable of reaching a 'truth' that is uncontaminated by politics and subjective value judgments.²² What is more important for these critics is to try to be open about the basis of one's own values and priorities. This involves being 'up-front' about the fact that everything we do and think is shaped by the particular power relations in our society.

In Australia, relevant forms of power include the history of colonialism and its continuing impact on Aboriginal people and others; the workings of capitalism as the central economic structure of the nation; and the dominance of 'things male' over 'women's concerns'. Relations like these interlink and also connect with less obvious forms of power, such as the campaign efforts of different claims-makers. So, for example, feminist accounts of violence have made some inroads into public consciousness via the media and parliamentary lobbying – but some original goals have become altered in the process, and the more successful lobbyists and media spokespeople have tended to be white and have a relatively privileged class background. This makes it less likely that a study or database will be sufficiently inclusive to allow analysis of the dynamics of violence affecting different social groups within the category of, say, 'women victims/survivors of violence'. The subsequent interpretations are more likely to be applicable to white, middle class and heterosexual women, and even then are too generalising.

'Success' has also often meant using at least some tools which are favoured by the more dominant social groups, such as carrying out 'objective' research. As will be discussed later in the paper, 'objectivity' tends to be associated with the point of view which, often unconsciously, endorses the status quo. The combination of using these kinds of tools with the likelihood that it will be the more 'conforming' aspects of domestic accounts that will become widely visible, means that certain injustices may be left untouched – and that these omissions will not be noted as a problem.

²¹ Crotty 1998: 1-9

²² For example Yllö and Bograd 1988, MacDonald 1996a

Part of what we might call the critical feminist project is therefore to think about what certain kinds of narratives make possible, as well as what they make difficult to imagine. Seeing what narratives allow and suppress is essential to the research process. It also distinguishes feminist research from an 'objective' study that does not draw attention to its own biases. Such feminist researchers argue that their research can be said to be better for admitting its influences. Its findings can therefore be regarded as carrying more weight than work that claims it has found the undistorted truth.

These kinds of epistemological considerations apply to research-supported claims about violence. In relation to domestic violence, we can see the default position is a particular narrative about what domestic violence means. It makes it harder to keep in mind that our definition of domestic violence might be broader than this and cover parent-child and sibling abuse, the abuse of elderly people by their offspring, and the abuse of people in residential institutions where the perpetrators are their caregivers. These scenarios could at least hypothetically involve a female perpetrator and male victim, but need more discussion on their own terms and with reference to the relevant research. Other complexities and questions needing further thought arise from considering domestic violence as intimate, where that implies a couple in a close, probably sexual, relationship. Even if 'domestic' is conceptualised in this quite narrow manner, the default position leaves out the possibility of same-sex domestic violence.²³ Given the subject of this Discussion Paper, the possibility of violence in man-to-man relationships is especially pertinent.²⁴

The research and the resulting picture can then tend to be mutually reinforcing – researchers do not set out to look for what they do not consider they will find. Typically, research that tries to measure rates and characteristics of domestic violence begins with a sample consisting only of women, who are usually presumed to be heterosexual. If both men and women are studied, only man-woman relationships are considered. Similar criticisms can be made of the way in which cultural differences are often glossed over, even in large-scale research studies.²⁵

However the issue is not a straightforward one of simply being inclusive of diversity, because of the risk of reinforcing stereotypes around what some commentators called 'the

²³ The term 'same-sex' allows for the fact that an individual in this kind of relationship will not necessarily identify their partnership as 'gay' or 'lesbian'.

²⁴ See, in contrast, Renzetti and Miley 1996, Bergen 1998, and Bagshaw et al 2000: 107-122. Woman-to-woman domestic violence is similarly often excluded from research and policy, due to a heterosexual presumption in defining an intimate relationship (see also Renzetti 1992).

²⁵ Even when cultural differences are overtly acknowledged in the research, and often they are not (Hegarty and Roberts 1998: 52); as in the *Women's Safety Australia* survey (ABS 1996b), the final numbers may be too small to be seen as statistically meaningful, and consequently extra efforts are still needed to increase study participation by cultural minorities (MacDonald 1997: 10).

marked category'.²⁶ This term sums up those forms of identification (usually assigned by people outside them) like 'non'-white and 'non'-heterosexual, which are seen as noteworthy because they are not regarded as part of the norms. Generally invisible and taken-for-granted, norms like whiteness and heterosexuality tend to deny their 'others' through suppressing signs of how, with power on their side, the norms have in fact been constructed to be so – for instance, via media representations, the curricula of schools, and government policy.

There is a risk of over-emphasising the contribution that other groups make to the domestic violence figures. This is where the concept of the marked category comes in. For instance, if an indigenous or gay person commits a crime, it tends to be interpreted in the media as somehow a function of their difference from the 'mainstream' in a way that does not happen for a white or heterosexual person, whose identity is usually regarded as incidental to what they have done.²⁷ As a consequence, there is a danger that somehow crimes by people in marked categories will be seen to carry more proportional weight than those associated with what is regarded as 'normal'. In this way stereotypes like that of a homosexual child molester, are reinforced.

This risk might not be so great if members of those groups which are marginalised had more of a profile when they did what they do most of the time – that is, live fairly ordinary and benignly different lives from the assumed norms. Instead, being in a marked category can often mean oscillating between invisibility and being seen as nothing but the label, when that latter is also likely to be associated with negative attributes and therefore somehow implies that the identity itself causes the behaviour.

But at the same time, to deny the existence of domestic violence between same-sex couples and within specific ethnic groups, whether same-sex coupled or not, is to erase the experiences, and so deny the needs of, victims/survivors. These experiences and needs may also be shaped in important ways by the fact of belonging to a social group which is at the least usually a numerical minority, if not also actively disadvantaged and oppressed in some way. We need to be able to construct a specific and appropriate picture of domestic violence in these contexts, rather than just assume that 'one size fits all'.

²⁶ See, for example, Wittig 1982, hooks 1984, Harding 1986

²⁷ See, for example, Kernot 1990

Specific research can show how racism and Anglo-centric views, policies and processes can make it more difficult for victims from certain cultures to seek and receive effective help from official sources.²⁸ For instance, an Aboriginal woman whose family member died in custody is unlikely to feel confident that the police will be able to support her to end the violence against her. Victims may also be in a double bind over being 'disloyal' to, or shaming, their community when they name domestic violence. They may fear ostracism and isolation from their main source of identity and cultural support.²⁹ This has implications for studies involving women from diverse backgrounds. While only some Anglo-Australian women report their victimisation to an official or researcher, the proportion of those who tell is likely to be even lower for many others, like Aboriginal and many groups of migrant women.³⁰ This will skew the final percentages in the studies.

The relationship between the violence experienced by ethnic minority women, and systematic forms of power and control, can take different forms compared to the situation of many Anglo women. It is not surprising that a feminist analysis which focuses only on gender does not sit comfortably with those in other communities who also consider what is often labelled 'domestic violence' to be unacceptable. They may prefer the term 'family violence', which emphasises the involvement of the whole family and community in being traumatised and shamed, and in addressing the issue. Focusing on family violence also tries to resolve it in a way which addresses the impact of power relations like colonialism and/or racism and maintains important kinship and cultural ties.³¹ Challenging and changing the forms of power which support family violence may also include working against male domination, although just as among Anglo-Australians, there are conflicts over whether this should be viewed as an important form of oppression in its own right with special significance for ending violence against women.³²

As another illustration, research on violence in lesbian relationships suggests that some of the experiences of victims/survivors seem to be similar, whether they are women in heterosexual or lesbian couples.³³ At the same time though, in woman-to-woman contexts neither victim nor perpetrator has the back-up of the dominant practices and beliefs that support

28 Cultural Perspectives 2000

29 Cultural Perspectives 2000

30 For example, Eastaerl 1996: 36-7, Cultural Perspectives 2000: 26

31 Cultural Perspectives 2000: 51-3

32 Further literature on family violence or domestic violence within Aboriginal and other diverse minority ethnic communities is available from the DVIRC library.

33 For example, Looking Out for Each Other 1997

the 'rights' of men. Both women are instead vulnerable to homophobia and heterosexism.³⁴ A victimised woman in a same-sex relationship may fear being disbelieved if she tells a service provider about the abuse, since her experience does not fit the default view of domestic violence. Alternatively, as with some women from minority ethnic backgrounds (as many lesbians are as well), her experience may be attributed to a stereotype of 'those kinds of relationships' as being violent. The existence of violence in same-sex female relationships suggests that gendered power cannot be the whole explanation for such violence. Some of the issues raised for lesbian victims/survivors are therefore different from those raised for heterosexual women (and the same might be said for lesbian compared to male perpetrators).³⁵

It is important to specify when the definition of 'domestic' being adopted is a selective one and to be wary of over-generalising, even for all individuals implicated in the narrower, default scenario. These caveats also apply to defining the other half of the phrase, 'violence'.³⁶ The most common way of understanding domestic violence in both research and public attitudes is to equate it with physical violence, and perhaps also sexual assault. It is relatively unusual for domestic violence to be conceptualised as also being about abuse in verbal and emotional terms, let alone in the economic and social realms. Yet how violence is defined will obviously make an enormous difference to the results of research and its consequent flow-on to policy and public awareness. Researchers might be best guided by considering whether applying a particular definition of both 'domestic' and 'violence', and their associated typifications, helps to advance social justice issues in as comprehensive a manner as possible.

Researching Domestic Violence: Some Concepts

If we adopt a somewhat modified picture of domestic violence as involving some specified forms of violence by one member of an intimate couple against the other, and so we at least claim to know what we might be looking for, we are still confronted with a host of research issues. These centre on three concepts: epistemology and the related concept of methodolo-

³⁴ Looking Out for Each Other 1997, Renzetti 1988

³⁵ This is a generalisation. Victims/survivors in same-sex relationships may have varying issues and needs depending on other factors like ethnicity, disability and their particular social situation (e.g. education and income disparities, a closeted relationship, substance abuse).

³⁶ See also MacDonald 1998

gy have already been introduced; and both are also connected to operationalisation, which is social science jargon for the way in which the researcher translates the concept in which they are interested, into a way of finding out more about it.³⁷

Someone interested in finding out how common domestic violence is must find a way to operationalise 'domestic violence' within a quantitative research framework – to turn it into something that can be observed and analysed, including being measured for eventual counting.³⁸ This involves defining identifiable features in order to label a context or experience as 'domestic violence'. Decisions would be made about relevant criteria such as:

- residence in a women's refuge;
- physical indicators like black eyes and bruising, combined with evidence that these injuries were inflicted by the victim's intimate partner; or
- victims' self-reports of appropriately defined modes of abuse, such as psychological attacks.

The research might use an existing 'instrument' to judge whether a particular example should be included or measured; or researchers could develop their own sophisticated assessment tool where an array of signs are combined or graded according to degree of severity on one or more scales. Alternatively, in qualitative research, while the concepts of epistemology, operationalisation and methodology still apply, the emphasis is not on counting and statistical analysis but on more open-ended and detailed person-to-person techniques, such as in-depth interviews.³⁹

Using the selected methods, the researcher can start to identify domestic violence. She or he might choose a sample of people as research participants.⁴⁰ The sample is the actual group being studied, which is some sort of sub-set of the population – the larger universe of people to whom the research is understood to apply.⁴¹ The actual composition of both the sample and the population is a matter for careful consideration, as this will have a significant bearing on what conclusions may be drawn from the research. For instance, results will have a specific meaning and potential impact if the people in the sample are randomly selected from the general Australian population. Random means that everyone in the population has an equal chance of being selected for the sample, and so the sam-

37 Judd et al 1991: 17, 26-46. Geffner et al (1988) and Gelles (1992) offer useful discussions of methodological issues in family violence research.

38 Judd et al (1991) explain the process as moving from the construct (the abstract concept) to the variable (the concrete representation of the construct) and then to the operational definition (the procedure for measuring the variable).

39 Readers wanting more of an overview of the different social science approaches to intimate violence could start with Stark and Flitcraft (1988).

40 Judd et al 1991: 72-3

41 Judd et al 1991: 130-140

ple is representative of the population. While it is not necessary that the sample be random, it must be if the researcher desires to find out about how *common* domestic violence is.

In the case of a random sample, the quantitative researcher develops a way of counting the violence via a survey.⁴² They might focus on the number of discrete incidents of violence, or on the number of couples where domestic violence has ever been present, regardless of how long it has gone on and how frequent it is (although these factors could also be built in to a complex study). Two useful measures here are *incidence* (the amount of domestic violence going on over a specified period of time in a population) and *prevalence* (the proportion of the population likely to be a victim (or perpetrator) of domestic violence at some stage in their lifetimes).⁴³

A difference is also made to the research depending on how the researcher defines the population from which the random sample is taken. The population might be 'all women in Australia'; or 'all Australian women who have ever been in an intimate couple relationship'.⁴⁴ The first option will give a lower figure than the second, because 'all women in Australia' includes women for whom domestic violence (at least as defined by the default position) cannot be applicable. However, even the second option will be expected to include women who have never experienced domestic violence, as the sample should be representative of a broad population of Australian women. Using the same reasoning, it is clear that a self-selected sample, for instance, asking women who have ever experienced domestic violence to respond to an advertisement, or a random sample of women from one Australian women's refuges, cannot possibly tell us anything about how common domestic violence is; but can provide other more detailed information via qualitative research.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches have much in common when the details of how the research is to be conducted are considered. In both frameworks, some kind of threshold definition of what counts as 'violence', and the parameters of population and sample, must be established. The researcher must interpret the results so that they are translated back into the framework that motivated the research in the first place – and so perhaps challenge those very assumptions, or confirm them. Reflections by the researcher may also include analysing the

⁴² Judd et al 1991: 100-107

⁴³ Prevalence could be calculated over the entire lifetime, or as related to specific time periods, such as 'between 20 and 30 years old'. See e.g. Ferrante et al 1996: 3-4.

⁴⁴ Judd et al 1991: 130-140, MacDonald 1997: 8

limitations of the particular methodology, including issues like epistemological assumptions and sampling, as well as considering possible effects from the way the original concept was operationalised.

In other respects, quantitative and qualitative research are quite different. A trained researcher who processes vast numbers of results from a quantitative method like a survey has faith in the ability of large-scale statistical analysis to truthfully abstract from people's experiences in a way that says something meaningful about the original research question. Quantitative researchers are unlikely to interview everyone by themselves, but instead often head a large team. This contrasts with the sole researcher or small investigative group which undertakes qualitative research. Qualitative researchers usually have doubts about what quantitative studies can actually say about people's real lives.

The favourite data-gathering method of the quantitative researcher is the structured questionnaire.⁴⁵ This is administered, often via relatively brief face-to-face or telephone interviews. The clinical overtones of 'administered' are no accident. Quantitative research has a strong affinity with science. Alternatively, the survey form is posted or left to be self-administered – filled out and posted back by the respondent (research participant) after completion. Such questionnaires tend to ask rather circumscribing questions and require restricted answers, because quantitative questions must be standardised in some way so that the results produced from statistical analysis can be judged as valid and reliable measurements.⁴⁶ Quantitative questions therefore tend to be highly structured and closed. They might, for example, offer just three categories to be ticked, or allow only 'yes' or 'no' responses, or require the respondent to place themselves somewhere on a numbered scale, or in other ways present respondents with a rigid and limited choice of options, the answers to which can then be coded.

In contrast, qualitative questions are likely to be more open. For instance, they might ask the research subject how they felt or what happened next, without limiting the options. The qualitative researcher tends to spend considerable time with each subject in her or his much smaller sample of people, in order to find an answer to questions like those about the impact of domestic violence on victims/survivors. This

⁴⁵ Judd et al 1991: 215-227

⁴⁶ Judd et al 1991: 51-61. There are several different kinds of validity. A study is said to have high 'construct validity' when the degree of operationalisation is high; in other words, when the way the concept is translated into a measurable form has a very good chance of 'catching' the kinds of things covered by the original concept, and only those. 'External validity' is about the extent to which we can generalise from the results to relevant populations. Reliability criteria are concerned with being able to repeat the research under the same conditions, following the same framework, and get the same results, regardless of who carries it out.

approach emphasises the value, and often the ultimate truth, of subjective and detailed experience, especially of disempowered groups. Such research is also likely to stress the necessity of building up rapport, trust and cooperation between researcher and subjects, in which those researched have a role in shaping the process and its ultimate products.⁴⁷ The cooperative stance is adopted not only because it is thought to get better results, but also because the way the research process itself tends to be followed in quantitative work is seen by qualitative researchers to be implicated in the status quo. The choice of research methodology can therefore also be a political decision.

In social science, as in many other academic disciplines and fields, quantitative research has historically been dominant over qualitative forms. It is associated with a broader attitude to knowledge, called positivism. Positivist social research claims to be objective. It models itself on a (now at least partly outdated) view of science as the ideal way to seek knowledge, and aims to get at 'the facts' of a research topic. In contrast, qualitative research is linked to anti-positivism, which came into prominence in the 1960s as various disenfranchised groups, and others committed to social justice, began to criticise the role of positivist social science (and science) in oppression. Feminists have criticised what they describe as 'the mythology of hygienic research' in which the researcher is meant to remain detached and therefore supposedly objective, but actually manipulates his (although sometimes her) research subjects as if they were objects.⁴⁸ From the anti-positivist perspective, the irony is that the more research claims to be objective, the more bound up with dominant power relations it actually is.

This short history about research methods is important background, because domestic violence has overwhelmingly been researched via quantitative (and positivist) methods. Although this state of affairs has been challenged to some extent since the 1970s, the quantitative approach is still enormously influential in social science, particularly in the US where much of the research on domestic violence has been carried out. It is useful at this point to return to the idea of claims-making and consider that statistical 'facts' are especially powerful weapons in any battle to define a social problem. Best (1990) suggests three rules of thumb in statistical claims-making:

- big numbers are better than little ones;

⁴⁷ For example, Yllö and Bograd 1988

⁴⁸ Oakley 1981: 58

- official claims are better than unofficial; and
- big, official numbers are best of all.

Claims about the numbers of male compared to female victims of domestic violence are underwritten by these rules, and examining the statistical claims takes us to the heart of quantitative territory.

However, we should not prejudge the issue and simply substitute 'enemy' for 'quantitative'.⁴⁹ Some quantitative work is usefully complex in its design and interpretation; and there are many examples of social research which draw on aspects of both qualitative and quantitative techniques.⁵⁰ This is because there are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches.⁵¹ Qualitative research, especially when it is shaped by a social justice orientation, operationalises the concept of domestic violence via methodologies which tend to be more labour-intensive per 'result' than quantitative research. Consequently, qualitative research can tell us much about the rich detail of individual and small groups' experiences, which is usually missing from quantitative research.⁵² However, qualitative approaches have a limited ability to deal with large samples and to generalise about trends in whole populations or societies. In contrast, efficiency and standardisation allow the quantitative researcher to make larger supported claims about the population being sampled, and even to compare across countries and try to predict future patterns.

Most feminists are likely to come down more on the side of qualitative research, and approach quantitative studies with a healthy dose of scepticism, while conceding that there is a place for large-scale surveys to give some sense of the 'big picture'.⁵³ The reality is that quantitative 'number-crunching' remains over-privileged in the social research field, which means that quantitative work may be a strategic choice when faced with funding and lobbying requirements. At the very least, critics need to understand it in order to offer alternatives.

It is important to spell out the parameters of social research in this way, because so much of the current controversy over men as victims of domestic violence centres on differences in research epistemology, operationalisation, and methodology, as well as the subsequent interpretation of the results obtained.

49 Yllö 1988

50 For example, Yllö and Bograd 1988, Smith 1994, DeKeseredy 1995

51 More recently, social justice politics have also become associated with post-positivism, which takes the original critique of positivism further and in the process considers how even anti-positivism is also still bound up with what it claims to reject. This stance is beginning to have an impact on feminist work in the violence field, and tends to be associated with postmodernism; see e.g. Lamb (1999) and the argument in this Discussion Paper that all claims about 'the truth' of violence have a perspective and their own way of shoring it up.

52 MacDonald 1996a

53 For example Dobash and Dobash 1983, but see also Yllö 1983, 1988, Currie 1998

Men as Victims: Some Claims and Agendas

Claims about men as victims of domestic violence come from a variety of sources and take a range of forms. However when the assertions are traced and analysed, they mainly tend to link back to either the men's movement or family violence research. It is useful to follow some examples of claims and examine the ultimate resources used to try to 'own' the problem.

Anecdotes

One of the most obvious areas of claims-making about men as victims is the anecdotal. For instance, in a large recent study of domestic violence by both men and women, Bagshaw et al briefly note from their discussions with Aboriginal people that according to representatives of the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council in 1998, violence by Aboriginal women against men does occur, but usually in public and with a different impact to that of violence by men against women.⁵⁴ No other information about Aboriginal male victims appears in the report. Similar claims appear in a companion study of diverse Australian attitudes to violence involving both indigenous communities and people interviewed in languages other than English. While most people interpreted domestic or family violence to mean the default position of a man using violence against his female partner, some participants felt that emotional abuse by a woman of a man existed and was also a form of domestic violence. Aboriginal interviewees commented that 'women can be perpetrators too', 'men get bashed too. It's no longer acceptable to just keep targeting the male as perpetrator'. The report writers frame these comments within a statement that 'there was a perception that in certain circumstances the community may see violence as justifiable' and under the heading of 'self defence or retaliation'.⁵⁵

While writing this Discussion Paper, I lost count of the number of people who, on learning of the general topic of domestic violence by women against men, responded along the lines of 'Yes, an important and overlooked problem. I know of a man who . . .' It was rare for the speaker to offer any system-

⁵⁴ Bagshaw et al 2000: 126

⁵⁵ Cultural Perspectives 2000: 28

atic evidence of abused men, but they often conveyed a sense that somehow male victims were not getting their needs met and had been overlooked by the default position of domestic violence. It is hard to know how many of the accounts of women's violence against men – often simply passing references – are describing a woman's justified response to being assaulted. The issue of self-defence will be pursued later, but if self-defence is not relevant, how are we to understand the incidents and situations described?

It is important not to reject such claims out of hand simply because they do not have 'hard evidence'. To do so would produce uncomfortable echoes of the recent past (and often still present) where feminists campaigning against injustices have experienced the issue being suppressed because they have not been able to translate it into acceptable research terms. At the same time though, the domestic violence field is at the point where advocates for victimised women have put in much of the hard and thorough work judged necessary to substantiate their claims. So it seems reasonable for other claimants to do the same, especially when their stories appear to cut across at least some feminist assertions.

This Discussion Paper's assessment of 'the evidence' on male victims therefore operates in the shadow of what feminists and all women who have experienced violence continue to have to confront in their/our claims to 'truth' and 'reality'. Such a double awareness is useful and important, for while taking a larger view of the social patterns of gender and other oppression, we ought not to deny the personal experience of pain for some men. At least at times, the anecdotes do convey a sense of those voices wanting and needing acknowledgment, in a mode which simply talking about what tends to happen 'on average' does not address.

Here is an example of the kind of anecdotes I am talking about. It is written from a man's personal experience.

At age 42, I am 6'2" and about 200 lbs. I have a solid background in wrestling and have dabbled in TKD and Judo. I am also a DV survivor. I am NOT a 'victim'! In the summer of 1993 my X came home drunk and on pain pills. I was asleep in "our" bed having returned from a charity event earlier that evening. I was awakened by her screaming as she came through the bedroom door swinging a baseball bat. She brought it down across my legs. I managed to avoid most of the blow

and took the bat away from her by twisting it out of her hands. She went to the kitchen and got a marble rolling pin. She stood above me in the bed and swung the pin down at my head shattering the light fixture above us. I managed to block that blow with a pillow. She trapped the rolling pin. Again I twisted the object out of her hands. She left the room and I got up to get dressed to leave.

As I started to get dressed I could hear her screaming as she approached the bedroom door 'I'm going to kill you, you son of a bitch!' Instinctively I knew that she had retrieved my 357 handgun and I was prepared as she entered the bedroom. No, I didn't hit her with the bat or rolling pin, and in fact, that option did not occur to me until I wrote this. No, I 'locked' the cylinder and hammer with both hands so the gun wouldn't discharge . . . and I twisted it out of her hands. She suffered a minor sprain to her wrist at that point as I was a bit 'motivated' . . .

Her response to the event was that she was giving me a 'pretty major plea for a hug' . . . Since we separated she has tried to run me down with her car. I did not report it to the authorities as I was afraid that the judge would further limit my contact with my child.⁵⁶

Making Claims from a 'Men's Rights' Perspective

The largely North American men's rights websites, such as that from which this example has been taken, claim there is a vast prevalence of battering of men by women, at least equal to the rate and severity of victimisation of women.⁵⁷ Statements about the gender symmetry of abuse are typically authorised by referring to the work of family violence researchers Murray Straus, Richard Gelles and Suzanne Steinmetz. The sites also reproduce popular journalism articles, and offer personal testimonies from men claiming to have been battered (and, often, of having been wrongly accused of being batterers or child abusers). They sometimes give profiles of 'abusive women'. Frequently, feminist claims about battering as an issue of oppression of women are also specifically attacked, along with government policies, prevention and treatment services, all of which are seen to be gender-biased. Links are also made to general men's rights organisations. Both the websites and popular journalism sometimes make parallels with studies on les-

⁵⁶ www.vix.com/menmag

⁵⁷ The internet offers a huge number of websites on domestic violence, some of which include material on men as victims. See <www.blainn.cc/abuse, www.safe4all.org>, as well as sites devoted specifically to the issue of 'battered men' (<www.vix.com/menmag> and <www.vix.com/pub/men>).

bian battering, to show that female perpetrators exist. In one case, DVIRC's pamphlet on lesbian domestic violence has been slightly adapted (and with DVIRC unacknowledged) to read as an outline of the experiences of battered men.⁵⁸

Whether or not there is also genuine concern for male victims, these types of men's rights claims overtly detract from a focus on men's responsibility for the vast bulk of violence against women, and much violence against children, especially child sexual abuse.⁵⁹ The logic seems to be that if 'men are victims of domestic violence too', then women are perpetrators (heterosexuality assumed). In that case, then, violence simply cannot be a feminist issue, men as a social category are not implicated as oppressors, and gender inequities are not part of the problem of violence. Because these claims are also often associated with a criticism of feminist-informed research claims about men's violence against women, they take us back again to the basic concepts of research and the feminist critique of many social science studies, especially when they are quantitative.

Making News: Publishing and 'Men's Rights'

The more overt men's rights websites share themes with some popular journalism, usually in the form of magazine and newspaper articles. The media in general can be regarded as secondary claims-makers.⁶⁰ They present their own version of others' claims. Individual journalists can also be claims-makers in their own right, particularly with this kind of issue, where outside individuals may contribute 'op-ed' pieces. The journalists give their own understanding of the family violence research, and often attack feminist statistics, as well as presenting personal stories from battered men.⁶¹ How this is then fed back into individual reader opinions is a complicated and variable process. All involved have their own interests and values that will shape their understanding. For example, it is common knowledge in media studies that in order for a topic to be newsworthy, it must be 'fresh' in some way or offer an apparently new angle. Consequently, domestic violence, at least as portrayed by the default position, is not likely these days to make news on a regular basis. In contrast, 'battered husbands' are 'a classic "man bites

⁵⁸ www.vix.com/pub/men/battery

⁵⁹ Pease 1996, Flood 1999, Wadham 2000

⁶⁰ Best 1990

⁶¹ Pease 1996: 36. See for example, Coochey 1995 and in reply MacDonald 1996a; Cook 1997

dog” story’.⁶² If a men’s rights group claims that men are overlooked as victims, and if this seems to be backed up by large-scale research with big numbers of abused men, then in the current climate it will probably make news. The news format also likes the human element, which is where the anecdotal, in the form of ‘one abused man’s story’ or a violence worker’s personal opinion, may be incorporated. It might also be a helpful ‘hook’ for the narrative to claim that there has been some kind of feminist conspiracy in covering up women’s violence and insisting that women are only ever powerless.⁶³ This ties in with a tendency in mainstream Australian and US media in recent years to protest against ‘political correctness’ and ‘victim feminism’.⁶⁴

In this age of information overload, people’s attention and recall is also selective. It therefore becomes even more important to try to trace material back to its sources and examine them. One of the most striking aspects of claims about male victims is how often they refer to the same small number of articles and pieces of research to authorise their views. For example, Philip Cook’s American book, *Abused Men: The Hidden Side of Domestic Violence* (1997) acknowledges both leading family violence researcher Murray Straus and social work professor R.L. McNeely as major supports for his project, and they also endorse his book on the back jacket.⁶⁵ Cook thanks Suzanne Steinmetz, who was a colleague of Straus and who coined the phrase ‘battered husband syndrome’. Cook also draws substantially on her arguments. His arguments veer between a humanist approach to violence and a more overt men’s rights perspective. For example:

*If the patriarchal system is at the root of wife battering, and not other, more important factors such as upbringing, learned behavior, stress, drinking, and lack of conflict resolution skills, then the situations of men and women are very different, and our response to domestic violence – even in today’s world – must be different for the genders. Hard data may be lacking, but there are signposts that question this assumption.*⁶⁶

Examples of domestic violence in woman-to-woman relationships are again used here as ammunition for the stance that ‘women are (just as) violent too’ (and so, by implication, violent in the same way as men).⁶⁷ Such use of studies of lesbian domestic violence fails to note the caveat of those researchers that

⁶² Gelles 1979: 67

⁶³ For example, Dunn 1994, Coochey 1995, People’s Equality Network 1995b, Cook 1997: 109-139

⁶⁴ Davis 1997: 45-98, Pease 1996, Atmore 1998. A specific Australian example is Don Parham’s 1993 documentary on domestic violence, *Deadly Hurt*, screened on SBS television.

⁶⁵ A social work journal article which McNeely co-wrote with G. Robinson-Simpson [1987] is frequently cited to claim apparent academic endorsement of the men-as-victims view. See its critique by Saunders (1988), the authors’ reply, and letters to the editor in the same issue.

⁶⁶ Cook 1997: 29

⁶⁷ For example, Cook 1997: 30-31; see also Dunn 1994

women's violence must be analysed and understood within a feminist understanding of gendered power relations, rather than being seen to contradict their very existence.⁶⁸

In journalistic accounts that suggest the men-as-victims picture has been denied due to a stranglehold on the domestic violence field by feminism, it is also common to make more general claims and to cite what could be described as 'backlash' literature. Cook refers approvingly to Warren Farrell's (1993) *The Myth of Male Power*, and Christina Hoff Sommers' (1994) *Who Stole Feminism?* He also includes a list of 'selected resources' at the back of his book, among which are the US men's rights organisations Men's Health Network, National Coalition of Free Men, and Father's Rights and Equality Exchange (FREE). The websites use similar authorisations, for instance articles by US journalist Cathy Young attacking various aspects of the feminist understanding of domestic violence appear twice on one site and three times on another.⁶⁹ Straus's articles and views appear frequently, although they are often selectively presented or secondhand. Philip Cook appears on at least one site, as does 'radical feminist' Suzanne Steinmetz, and Erin Pizzey.⁷⁰ The US <www.vix.com/menmag> pages link to the Brisbane-based Men's Rights Agency site (<www.ecn.net.au/~mra>), which in turn includes, under 'Worth Reading', both Warren Farrell and Christina Hoff Sommers.

Men as Victims: What the Research Indicates

Even the more apparently authoritative social research has major faults. Because the research is such a powerful resource for the other claims, it deserves a closer examination. I am concentrating here on the research applicable to the couple model in the default position of domestic violence (that is, the adult, heterosexual, cohabiting couple), because this is the main focus of the claims. Evaluation of research on 'dating' relationships, couples who live separately, same-sex male couples, and domestic violence by young women against young men are separate discussion papers in themselves; although it seems likely that at least some of the findings about the default model will have relevance for other types of couples also.⁷¹

Most research into domestic violence has not considered the question of whether men are ever victims and if so, how com-

68 Renzetti 1992, 1999

69 <www.vix.com/pub/men/battery>; <www.vix.com/menmag/battered>

70 The use of comments and writing by 'friendly' women and 'feminists' is probably a deliberate technique.

71 See for example, Bergen 1998, Molidor and Tolman 1998

mon that is. This attitude is partly attributable to the default position of domestic violence, and is backed up by the fact that crisis services do not appear to encounter a significant need by male victims of domestic violence for support.

Official Records

The search for authoritative sources on male victims could begin with official records such as those of emergency services.

Police Records

In Australia, as in countries like the US, the vast proportion of people who are victimised by domestic violence and seek help from the police are women. Research by the Crime Research Centre of the University of Western Australia analysed several data sources, including police and hospital records. In 1994, women were victims in 91.4 per cent of the police domestic violence cases, and men were victims in 8.6 per cent of cases.⁷²

However it could be argued by men's rights groups that male victims are less likely than female victims to report to the police. There are many examples of published research on female victimisation which examine under-reporting to official sources.⁷³ Feminists argue that women are the greater under-reporters to official sources, and that this is because female victims appear influenced by some factors which seem likely to be more specific to them, such as fear of the perpetrator. Nevertheless, more research is needed on men's underreporting, and some emerging issues will be considered later in the Discussion Paper.

Hospital Data

Turning to hospital data does not resolve the question of whether the discovered gender patterns are accurate. Recent analysis of US hospital emergency department patterns shows that 84 per cent of those seeking treatment for an intentional injury by an intimate are women.⁷⁴ One Victorian hospitals study found that 1.3 per cent of female and 0.14 per cent of male emergency department presentations are the result of injury inflicted by partners. The Victorian figures (and probably the American data as well) are an underestimate due to

⁷² Ferrante et al 1996: 29

⁷³ For example, ABS 1996a, Keys Young 1998

⁷⁴ Greenfield et al 1998

issues such as the unwillingness of some patients to disclose domestic violence and the fact that some victims might not seek emergency hospital treatment.⁷⁵

If possible under-reporting by emergency patients (perhaps with a gender bias) was ignored, then at first glance it appears that both the American and Victorian data show that injury from domestic violence is also more likely for women. However, there are difficulties in generalising, partly because only some kinds of statistical information are recorded, presented and publicly available for analysis. For instance, it can make a difference whether the data collected is from hospital admissions, or treatment in Accident and Emergency as an out-patient.

Ferrante et al point out that, overall, men have more emergency department presentations than do women, due to men's over-representation as victims of violent crime as a whole.⁷⁶ As far as the Victorian study is concerned, this means that men's domestic violence presentations, as a percentage of their total hospital cases, may seem smaller than women's, but the figure needs more analysis and discussion than usually accompanies the use of such data. As a further example, in the Western Australian study the problem was that figures for male injury from domestic violence were only available indirectly, by looking at hospital cases of violence against men occurring in the home. However violence taking place in the home may not involve an intimate (and an intimate can also be violent outside the home). As well, both the Western Australian study and what we know about patterns of violence for men and women in general suggests that the 'fit' between violence at home and violence by an intimate might be less for male victims than female ones.⁷⁷ If we ignore these problems and take violence in the home to mean 'domestic violence', and then use other non-hospital sources to generalise from the Western Australian data to Australia as a whole, this results in women seeming to have only a slightly higher rate of domestic violence injury than men.⁷⁸

It is difficult to be sure about what to conclude about this, because in order to be able to generalise, the classification of violence needs to be consistent across the data sources, and this is not the case. Hospital emergency department data like these are a good demonstration of how statistics from official sources can be used to argue that domestic violence against men is as

⁷⁵ Sherrard et al 1994, cited in Ferrante et al 1996: 19

⁷⁶ Sherrard et al 1994, cited in Ferrante et al 1996: 19

⁷⁷ Ferrante et al 1996: 87-80, Rennison and Welchans 2000: 5

⁷⁸ Ferrante et al 1996: 87-90

serious a social problem as domestic violence against women.⁷⁹ In any case, as previously discussed in relation to understandings of violent crime, simply citing official records not only underestimates the prevalence of domestic violence, including against men, but gives a skewed and sketchy picture of its characteristics.⁸⁰ The next step in this kind of investigation is therefore to consider crime data derived from government-sponsored surveys.

Surveys

Crime and Safety Surveys

National crime and personal safety surveys can be carried out in different ways. The general picture produced from overseas sources is one where, while overall men are more often victims of violent crime, 'intimate violence' (which tends to include same-sex relationships and former partners) is both more common and more likely to result in injury for women than it is for men.⁸¹

Unfortunately, the Australian Crime and Safety Survey, which researches the experiences of both men and women, does not produce clear prevalence rates of domestic violence.⁸² While assaults are classified under the category of 'family', regardless of location, this includes family members rather than only partners or ex-partners. The Australian Women's Safety Survey was designed to rectify this problem, but as the title suggests, it only researched the experiences of women.⁸³

As an indication of specific Australian figures for men, when the Crime Research Centre carried out its own crime survey in Western Australia it discovered only three male victims, each experiencing one domestic violence incident each, out of 1,511 male respondents (with doubt about the categorisation of two of these incidents). Consequently, the numbers were regarded as too small to subject to statistical analysis. The 12-month prevalence of injury-causing domestic violence was 1 per cent for women, and when domestic violence was defined in a broader way it rose to 2.1 per cent. When the victimisation survey results were combined with official records, women were found to make up between 88 per cent and 92 per cent of all domestic violence victims.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ For example, People's Equality Network 1995a

⁸⁰ Ferrante et al 1996: 6-9

⁸¹ For example, Dobash et al 1992: 74-76, Bachman 1994, Craven 1996, Mirrlees-Black 1999, Rennison and Welchans 2000

⁸² See for example, ABS 1998, MacDonald 1997

⁸³ ABS 1996a. This is also the case, at least at time of publication, with Canada, New Zealand and the Netherlands (Mirrlees-Black 1999: 86-88).

⁸⁴ Ferrante et al 1996: 63, 64, 104

Because they are run directly by the government, national crime surveys can afford to use a very large sample, making the results more generalisable to the whole population. For instance, the US National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) collects data from 100,000 people.⁸⁵ The most recent report on intimate violence is derived from the last NCVS, where intimate violence was defined to include murder (for some data analyses) and robbery. The survey found that in 1998, 7.7 per 1,000 women were victims, with the corresponding figure for men being 1.5. More female than male victims were injured (averaged from 1993–98: 50 per cent, compared to 32 per cent). However among those injured there was no significant difference between the proportions of men and women who suffered serious injuries, nor between injured men and women in terms of medical help-seeking (most did not seek help). Men and women who were young (in their 20s), or black, or home-renting, or urban, had ‘significantly higher’ rates of victimisation than corresponding other groups of men and women.⁸⁶

The NCVS obtains victimisation rates that are very low compared to other studies designed to improve reporting rates. One such example is the US National Violence Against Women Survey undertaken in 1995–96.⁸⁷ This research calculated that 25 per cent of women are raped and/or physically assaulted by a current or former spouse/partner/‘date’ at some time in their life, compared to 8 per cent of men. In the 12-month period prior to completing the survey, the comparable rates were 1.5 per cent and 0.9 per cent.⁸⁸ The 12-month rates are not hugely different for men compared to women. However women were ‘7 to 14 times more likely [than men] to report that an intimate partner beat them up, choked or tried to drown them, threatened them with a gun, or actually used a gun on them’.⁸⁹

Similar trends are apparent from the 1996 British Crime Survey. This was considerably smaller than its US counterpart but included a new computerised self-completion component on domestic violence to try to overcome victims’ reluctance to report to researchers.⁹⁰ The survey included ex-partner violence and same-sex relationships, and concentrated on measuring physical assault, including frightening threats, which are legally defined as assault. While 5.9 per cent of women and 4.9 per cent of men had experienced this definition of domestic

85 Interviewees are sampled from households, and so the survey does not count the experiences of homeless people or those in institutions, including shelters. While same-sex relationships are part of the database, there is no separate analysis of these, at least not in Rennison and Welchans (2000).

86 Rennison and Welchans 2000: 3

87 Tjaden and Thoennes 1998

88 These figures do not distinguish between heterosexual and same-sex couples. The data on physical assault were also obtained using a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scales, which will be discussed later in this Discussion Paper. However Murray Straus, the originator of those scales, regards the Violence Against Women Survey as still essentially a survey on crime, because it frames the questions in the context of personal safety – which he says explains why women appear victimised more than men (<www.vix.com/menmag/straus99>). The VAWS also collects data on rape and the CTS usually does not. Because of these methodological differences, the VAWS is discussed here and not under the label of the CTS.

89 Tjaden and Thoennes 1998: 7

90 Mirrlees-Black 1999

violence in the previous year, the lifetime prevalence was 23 per cent of women and 15 per cent of men for actual physical violence, and 26 per cent and 17 per cent respectively when frightening threats were also included. Women were more likely to be injured and frightened than men, and to be chronic victims (three or more violent incidents) – 12 per cent, compared to 5 per cent of men, over a lifetime. Almost all of the violence against women was committed by men (99 per cent), and 95 per cent of the assaults against men were by women. The British survey also helps to shed more light on the relationship between gender and under-reporting to officials. Virtually no male victims defined their experience as a crime, and male victims were less likely than female victims to see themselves as a victim of domestic violence, and more likely to blame themselves in some way. Female victims were more likely than male victims to admit to feeling upset, to talk about their experience to someone (e.g. a friend or an agency), and to find that helpful. This difference links at least partly to other factors like women tending to feel more injured and frightened, and less to blame, than men felt.

There were some interesting differences among ethnic groups. Women's risk of victimisation over a 12-month period in Britain did not appear to vary significantly according to ethnicity, but Bangladeshi/Pakistani men were 'much less likely than white men to say that they had been assaulted by a partner'.⁹¹ White men were the only men whose self-reports of victimisation actually slightly (but not statistically significantly) outnumbered those of women from the same racial category.⁹² The report gives no cross-analysis between issues like self-blame and ethnic group.⁹³ Further implications of the British survey are discussed under 'The Conflict Tactics Scale Studies' (below).

Community Surveys

Official government surveys still tend to underestimate violence, particularly that against women, due to factors like its mainly private nature, and the usual requirement in such studies that the violence be perceived as criminal.⁹⁴ It is therefore important to turn to what can be termed 'community surveys'. These operationalise the concept of domestic violence to make it broader than simply those contexts which people consider to

91 Mirrlees-Black 1999: 29

92 It is not clear from the report how many relationships were cross-cultural, and how ethnicity and same-sex relationships inter-related.

93 Part of the problem with these forms of sub-analysis is that the base population is already a small proportion of the total number of respondents, even in a large survey which tries to compensate for this. It becomes even smaller when prevalence measurement is confined to the last 12 months. The survey methods are still likely to underestimate the 'true' amount of violence anyway (see e.g. the discussion of others' presence during respondents' completion of the survey – Mirrlees-Black 1999: 96-99). Percentages within percentages like 'victims who blamed themselves' must then be calculated. Even when available, results may therefore not be regarded as statistically significant. This supports the case for research to concentrate on 'minority' groups as the study population, providing the methods are seen as appropriate and necessary by those communities.

94 Currie and MacLean 1997, Mihalic and Elliott 1997

be illegal. In doing so, community surveys try to obtain closer estimates of the 'real' level of violence, although due to constraints of time and money they tend to use smaller samples than do most crime surveys.

In 1988 a random telephone survey of 3,001 people in South Australia found that 12.8 per cent of the men had experienced domestic violence, compared to 22.8 per cent of the women. The survey included physical and emotional abuse in its definition of domestic violence, and found that when victims were asked about the effects of the physical violence, 16.5 per cent of the male victims reported being injured compared to 50.5 per cent of the women.⁹⁵

Hegarty and Roberts (1998) give a helpful recent overview of prevalence research, focusing particularly on community surveys. They compared selected overseas studies with all of the Australian prevalence studies that they could find. Once again, there is marked variation in the figures, depending on how domestic violence is defined and measured and how the sample is taken – for instance, whether men are included (usually not), or whether only women in current relationships and attending a doctor's surgery are surveyed.

Overall, in the US, abuse (usually defined as physical and perhaps also sexual) by partners over a lifetime appears to involve between 5 per cent and 20 per cent of the population. In Australia, 12-month prevalence estimates range from 2.1 per cent to 28 per cent, the latter in a general practice and so not a strictly random sample.⁹⁶

The highest prevalence rates tend to be obtained using a particular research tool called the Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS). This kind of research is associated with the 'family violence' theoretical perspective, and often studies both women's and men's victimisation. Overseas community surveys have generally used some form of the CTS, and have usually found between a 20 per cent and 25 per cent lifetime prevalence of partner abuse. Australian clinical and community prevalence studies have also almost all used the CTS, although in an adapted version in an attempt to make up for some of the scales' perceived omissions in the operationalisation of violence.⁹⁷

Three Australian studies which sampled men as well as women are outlined by Hegarty.⁹⁸ Two were samples of patients attending hospital emergency departments. The first produced

⁹⁵ *South Australian Health Goals and Targets: Violence and Abuse Priority Areas*, South Australian Department of Human Services, Adelaide, 1998, cited in Bagshaw and Chung 2000

⁹⁶ Hegarty and Roberts 1998

⁹⁷ Adaptations may include counting ex-partner as well as partner violence, and not limiting 'partners' to married or cohabiting couples.

⁹⁸ 1998: 40

12-month prevalence figures of 2.7 per cent of men and 7.4 per cent of women, with lifetime prevalence of 8.8 per cent and 23.6 per cent respectively. The second found 2.9 per cent of men and 7.1 per cent of women had been abused within 12 months, and 8.5 per cent of men and 19.3 per cent of women over their lifetime. The third was a random telephone community sample, with 12-month prevalence figures of 0.2 per cent for men and 2.1 per cent for women (lifetime prevalence was not available). It is likely that these figures are still underestimates; certainly other studies which surveyed only women found rates as high as 37 per cent over a lifetime, and 10 to 19.6 per cent over the last 12 months.⁹⁹

So far, the evidence – such as it is, given that men are often not researched – suggests that in general women appear to greatly outnumber men both in terms of prevalence of domestic violence victimisation and its impact, regardless of how the research is carried out. A concentration on women as victims is therefore not unwarranted; but nor can we ignore the apparent fact that there still is a significant number of male victims. It is necessary to search for detailed research to find out more about the context and consequences of domestic violence against men in comparison to women, and the associated picture of women's violence. Bagshaw and Chung (2000) provide a particularly helpful and succinct overview of the issues.

An important ongoing problem in coming up with indisputable figures from the Australian research is variation in research methodologies and in the operationalisation of domestic violence. As Hegarty concludes:

*The data on Australian populations are not available to give a true estimate of a broad multidimensional definition of abuse because of the limitations of the operationalised definitions used in existing studies. These definitions have either been much too narrow by not including emotional or sexual abuse (e.g. one episode of physical abuse in a lifetime of a relationship) or over general in their inclusion of acts (e.g. one episode of threats or verbal abuse in a lifetime).*¹⁰⁰

The Conflict Tactics Scales Studies

To recap, large studies with a fairly broad definition of domestic violence have tended to use the Conflict Tactics Scales as their measuring tool. The two biggest – and therefore often

⁹⁹ For example Hegarty's (1998) own study of general practice (female) patients, using a general definition of abuse. When abuse was only defined as physical, the comparable rates are 20 per cent and 5 per cent. The figure of 19.6 per cent comes from Hegarty's application of her own Composite Abuse Scale, looking at only current relationships and abuse in the last 12 months (especially p.165).

¹⁰⁰ 1998: 49

thought likely to be most accurate – CTS-based studies have been carried out in the US. The most striking aspect of this now 20-year-old and oft-cited research is its conclusion that women are as violent towards their male partners as men are towards their wives or girlfriends.

In the absence of large-scale random surveys of both genders in Australia, it is perhaps not surprising that Australians who have a bone to pick with the ‘woman-dominant’ victim picture have turned to these American studies. However, the fact that the samples were American raises the further issue of whether one country’s results can be compared to another’s. In other words, in the absence of comparable research in Australia, and even if we allow for many differences in data collection,¹⁰¹ can we confidently extrapolate from American findings – as indeed we have already been doing in discussing official data and crime surveys? More specifically, does domestic violence in Australia have a similar profile and prevalence to domestic violence in the US, at least to the extent that findings there are likely to be applicable here?

Issues of cross-national comparison in relation to violence are only just beginning to be explored, including in feminist work. As anthropologist Gayle Rubin once expressed it, the feminist task is to understand women’s oppression in both ‘its endless variety and monotonous similarity’.¹⁰² Certainly many of the same key themes have arisen in the US and Australia, both in terms of the general issue of how to address claims of male victimisation, as well as related tensions such as those between quantitative and qualitative research, the merits of official data versus victimisation studies, and differences between family violence and feminist approaches to domestic violence. However, the US has a higher rate of serious violent (official) crime than Australia, and so this might also suggest that their domestic violence prevalence figures, including perhaps for women against men, might be higher, or at least that this kind of victimisation might have a different profile to Australia’s in some significant way.

This is a complex issue which we cannot resolve with certainty.¹⁰³ One interesting approach is by Grandin and Lupri (1997) who compared survey results in the US and Canada. Despite Canada having a lower serious crime rate than the US, its domestic violence rates were actually greater – at least according

¹⁰¹ see for example
Mirrlees-Black 1999:
85-89

¹⁰² 1975: 160

¹⁰³ For example, the controversy over men as victims of domestic violence in the US has been fuelled by a related conflict over the meaning of homicide data, which can appear in some interpretations as a more gender-symmetrical issue than in Australia. See e.g. Dobash et al (1992: 74-82).

to how both surveys operationalised them.¹⁰⁴ It does seem likely though that large general trends are probably the same for similar western societies, especially given what we already know about other types of research results and official data. Nevertheless, this is a topic that needs further exploration. For the time being, it seems reasonable to look more closely at the stance and results of the American CTS studies, and to hypothesise that whatever we conclude about them is probably likely to be broadly applicable to the Australian situation.

The CTS research is associated particularly with two North American family violence researchers, Murray Straus and Richard Gelles. It is their work that appears overwhelmingly in claims, especially by men's rights groups, that there is a 'gender symmetry' in domestic violence. It is therefore important to summarise here the main features of Straus' and Gelles' research and theoretical approach to the issue of domestic violence.¹⁰⁵

The CTS was developed by Straus and has been used in a large number of family violence studies in the US, Australia and elsewhere. The largest research projects, and therefore the ones regarded by many people as being the most authoritative (although they are still small samples by crime survey standards), are two national US surveys carried out in 1976 by Straus and Gelles together with their colleague Suzanne Steinmetz; and by Gelles and Straus in 1985.¹⁰⁶ These two surveys asked questions about various forms of violence, including violence in couples.¹⁰⁷ While there were some differences between the methodologies of the surveys, they had mainly similar approaches. In each study the CTS was used to ask questions of one member of the couple about what *both* the respondent and their partner did when they had a conflict with each other.

One section of the CTS asked about violence, which was defined by Straus et al as 'the actual use of physical force'. Within this scale the researchers defined a hierarchy of seriousness of acts. This began with the 'lowest' item ('threw something at the other one') and progressed to 'pushed, grabbed, or shoved the other one'; 'slapped the other one'; 'kicked, bit, or hit with a fist'; 'hit or tried to hit with something'; 'beat up the other one'; 'threatened with a knife or gun'; and 'used a knife or gun'.

The First National Family Violence Survey (1976) found that, using these questions, violence had been a feature in 16 per cent of couples over the past year, and in 28 per cent over the

104 However Grandin and Lupri's approach appears to have similar problems to the CTS research which will be summarised later in the paper.

105 A much more in-depth analysis, including an examination of the more technical aspects of the studies, is DVIRC's 'Family Violence Perspectives and the Conflict Tactics Scales' (Atmore 2001).

106 Straus, Gelles and Steinmetz 1980, Gelles and Straus 1988, Straus and Gelles 1992

107 A 'couple' was defined as married or living in a (heterosexual) de facto relationship. For ease of discussion the members of the couple are referred to as husband and wife.

duration of the marriage. The most common situation reported by respondents was where both members of the couple had used violence – 49 per cent of the couples in which violence was said to have occurred. In 27 per cent of the violent couples, only the man was violent, and in 24 per cent of the violent couples, only the woman was violent. Overall, whether both or only one member of the couple behaved violently, the results translate to 12.1 per cent of all husbands and 11.6 per cent of wives acting violently at least once in the year. However, violent husbands were violent more frequently than were violent wives.

Straus et al also used the scale to differentiate between 'minor violence', and 'severe violence', i.e. violence that could be classified as 'abuse' or 'beating'. This was done by labelling the last five items of the violence scale as 'severe', which also means defining 'threw something at the other one', 'pushed, grabbed, or shoved the other one', and 'slapped the other one' as 'minor'. The severe violence rate was 3.8 per cent for the past year for husbands, and 4.6 per cent for wives. However when the results were broken down into specific violent acts, wives had higher rates than husbands for acts lower on the severe violence part of the scale (such as kicking and hitting). In comparison, husbands had higher rates for acts at the top end of the severe violence sub-scale (beating up, and using a knife or a gun).¹⁰⁸ It is not possible to give figures on severe violence for the course of the relationship (and so to look at broader patterns) because the research focused on the 12-month period before the survey. It was only if a respondent answered 'never' or 'don't know' to questions about violent acts in the past year, that they were asked if violence had ever happened, and not for further information about who committed it. It was therefore only possible to calculate a severe violence rate for *couples*. In the 1976 study, severe violence was a feature for 12.6 per cent of couples at some stage in their relationship.

The Second National Family Violence Survey (1985) had results comparable to those of the first Survey: in 49 per cent of the couples where violence was present, both the husband and the wife had used violence. However, in 1985 there were more cases where only the woman was violent: 28 per cent of the couples where violence was a feature, compared to 23 per cent where the violence was by men only. In 11.3 per cent of all of the couples, husbands had used violence against wives; and

108 Similarly, women had higher rates than husbands for the act lowest on the minor violence sub-scale, i.e. throwing objects at their partners. Men had higher rates than women for the higher acts on the minor violence scale: pushing, shoving and slapping.

in 12.1 per cent of the couples, wives had used violence against husbands. The rate of severe violence against wives by husbands had also declined (from 3.8 per cent in the 1976 study to 3.0 per cent in 1985); while severe violence by wives toward husbands remained about the same as it had been nearly ten years earlier (4.4 per cent compared to 4.6 per cent).

Straus et al drew on the results of the first Survey to argue that there is a gender symmetry in severe violence (abuse, or battering) rates, and that therefore battered men exist. This second assertion was made particularly forcefully by Suzanne Steinmetz, who went on to describe a 'battered husband syndrome' and to accuse researchers and the media of a 'selective inattention' to the problem.¹⁰⁹ However Steinmetz's use of the survey data and other research evidence has been strongly criticised,¹¹⁰ and Gelles and Straus have taken a slightly different view of the findings.

After the first Survey, Straus et al emphasised that – despite the fact that wives had higher rates of using severe violence than husbands – the issue of wives' victimisation was more serious, because women are more vulnerable than men both in terms of the impact of the violence and the overall situation perpetuating the violence. For instance, wives were believed by Straus et al to be more likely to be seriously injured due to men's greater strength, and women's vulnerability during pregnancy; combined with men's higher rates of the most dangerous and injurious violence, and their higher frequencies of violent acts. Straus et al also pointed out that women are more locked into marriage, due to factors like their low economic status relative to men.

The figures also do not tell us about the context of the violence. For instance, in cases where both husband and wife used violence, was most of the women's severe violence self-defence in response to an immediate act of violence from a husband, as many feminists argue?¹¹¹ Even where only the woman was severely violent, might she be pre-empting an attack, based on past violence from the husband that fell outside the year surveyed? While the first Survey researchers could only speculate, they suggested that of the 4.6 per cent of husbands who were victims of severe violence from their wives, the vast majority had initiated violence and abuse.¹¹² By 1985, some of these speculations were tested using extra questions about who initiated the violence for the most recent episode, and about

¹⁰⁹ Steinmetz 1977-78

¹¹⁰ For example, Pleck et al 1977-78

¹¹¹ For example, Kurz 1993

¹¹² Gelles and Straus 1988: 105

responses to being hit. Several of the findings were not clear, but certainly many 'violent women' appeared to have acted in self-defence. They were also found to compensate for inferior size and strength by hitting the violent partner with objects. This could help to explain why more women than men fell into the category of users of 'severe violence'.

However, the second Survey researchers concluded that women not only use violence as much as men but also initiate violence about as often. This was decided because a significant proportion of wives' violence – at least 25 per cent – did not appear to be in self-defence (although we should be cautious about this because some respondents may not have been clear that the researchers intended 'initiating' to mean *hitting*, and not simply starting an argument). There is also still the possibility that at least some of the violence initiated by women took the form of a pre-emptive strike.¹¹³

If we accept the CTS concept of violence, it does seem that there is a lot of women's violence that is not self-defence in any straightforward way. We then need to investigate whether the violence by wives has as much impact as that by husbands, as this relates to the issue of whether husbands can be said to be 'battered' in the same way as many wives. The second Survey made some attempt at this by trying to address the extent of injury from the violence. It asked questions about the effects of the violence, such as seeking medical help and taking time off work. Injuries were found to be significantly more severe when wives were on the receiving end than when husbands were: 3 per cent of women victims experienced injury, compared to 0.4 per cent of male victims of women's assaults.¹¹⁴ According to the second Survey then, violence by wives against husbands, regardless of context, does not seem to have as significant an impact on husbands as the reverse scenario. Other studies have also found husband-to-wife violence to be, on average, more injurious than wife-to-husband assaults.¹¹⁵

The family violence research approach is restricted by its sole reliance on quantitative methods. This prevents it from exploring meanings in any depth. In contrast, smaller-scale studies have produced a different picture of women's use of self-defence, and their more general use of violence against husbands. Hegarty found that 25 per cent of the abused women in her study admitted to physically abusing their partner.¹¹⁶

113 Stets and Straus 1992

114 Stets and Straus 1992. The operationalisation of injury (for example, an injury was recorded if a doctor was visited) can be criticised. For instance, a wife may experience heavy bruising on a regular basis, but as there is not much a doctor can do for this, she may just try to alleviate it herself. Factors like these help to explain why the percentage of assaults resulting in 'injury' seem to represent a very small proportion of the total violence.

115 Berk et al 1983, Brush 1990, Morse 1995

116 1998: 100

This abuse had been infrequent over the previous 12 months, and the main reasons given for it were 'made angry by their partner' (68 per cent) or in 'self-defence' (59 per cent). The women's violence was generally not a way of 'controlling their partner' (73 per cent said no), in contrast to the typical experience of husbands' violence by abused women.¹¹⁷ Hamberger and Potente (1994) review the results of their own and others' studies of women's violence in couples and argue similarly: most women who initiate violence fear they are in danger based on past victimisation, or are retaliating for past violence.

However the conclusions of more in-depth, albeit selective studies are generalisations and do not mean that all women's violence is justifiable and unproblematic. For example, the existing research on women's violence seems to focus on women who are known to be severely victimised, rather than those less common situations where the woman has no history of being abused. Nevertheless, the existing studies do support a need to unpick the different threads of forms of violence from the undifferentiated mass they assume via the CTS.

In contrast, the second Survey produced more of a stress from Gelles and Straus on the importance of taking violence by wives against husbands seriously, and an associated criticism of what they saw as feminist dismissals of the issue. Gelles and Straus noted that in comparison to 1976, violence by husbands against wives had actually decreased overall in 1985, while the husband abuse rate had remained unchanged. They have tended to take this result at face value, despite the possibility that differences in methods between the two surveys may have had an impact, and also despite their own acknowledgment that the apparent decrease in wife beating was not statistically significant. Gelles and Straus attribute the claimed change in men's violence against wives to the fact that between the two survey years this violence had begun to be taken seriously in government policy, media and general public attitudes; whereas husband abuse was (and they say, still is) invisible or trivialised.

The general stance on husband abuse is seen to be a problem not only for the male victims, but because from Straus' and Gelles' family violence perspective, all violence is unacceptable, and interlinked. They therefore argue that condoning women's violence against their husbands – even if on the face of it the

¹¹⁷ Dobash and Dobash 1979; Saunders 1986, 1988

consequences are less severe on average than the reverse scenario – actually contributes to a climate in which the more severe impacts of violence on *women* will continue unabated. That is because if a wife is violent towards her husband, it can set a precedent and provide justification for him to hit her, with generally more severe consequences. Feminists have considered this argument to be controversial because it veers towards blaming the woman victim.¹¹⁸ Even if the second Survey's methodology is accepted, it is debatable whether the findings support the view that women's violence is a significant cause of violence against them by husbands.¹¹⁹

The original CTS surveys appear to produce estimates of rates of violence that are both too high and not high enough: too high, because some of the violence labelled as 'abuse' may not be so; and not high enough because ex-partner violence and violence over the course of the relationship were not counted in a way that was able to identify any associated gender differences producing a skew.¹²⁰ While there have been some modifications of the CTS over the years, it continues to be used in many studies in its essential original format. A recent Australian survey will be summarised later in this Discussion Paper. The CTS therefore remains highly influential in social science research on domestic violence.

It is easy to see how men's rights groups can use the survey results and some of the interpretations from Straus and Gelles, and particularly Steinmetz, in a selective manner that glosses over the complexities behind the apparent gender symmetry in violence rates. In addition, there are various problems with the methodology and associated epistemology and operationalisation of the research.¹²¹

Problems with the Conflict Tactics Studies

Aggregated Data and Reporting

A major flaw in the operation of both surveys is their reliance on aggregated data. Only one person from each couple was interviewed, so there was no cross-matching of results for real-life couples. Instead, the respondent had to answer for both themselves and their partner; in other words, on both the question of being victimised and the issue of their own violent behaviour. The final rates were therefore calculated by counting responses from individual men and women, and assuming

¹¹⁸ For example, Kurz 1993

¹¹⁹ Atmore 2001

¹²⁰ For example, women are more at risk than men of victimisation by an ex-partner (e.g. Mirrlees-Black 1999: 29-30).

¹²¹ See also Bagshaw and Chung 2000

that what they said about their own and their partner's violence was what their partner would also have said.

Straus et al addressed this issue first by arguing that the samples were large and representative enough that the total number of husbands and wives 'averages out' any differences, and so it does not matter that the respondents were not actually coupled. This view seemed to be backed up by the first Survey, in which men's and women's reports produced comparable overall violence rates. However, this does not take into account the possibility that men and women might both be influenced to report similar rates, but that these could still be significantly different from the 'true' violence rates. For instance, men might under-report their own violence and overstate their victimisation by their wives. In contrast, women might over report their own violence and understate their victimisation. If this were the case, reports from either gender could produce the same rates. This possibility is not far-fetched when one considers, for example, that in male-dominant cultures a certain amount and level of violence by men against women is 'normal'; whereas women's violence, particularly against men, is considered to be 'deviant'.

Since the first Survey, various studies have found that using aggregated data probably generally underestimates levels of violence compared to interviewing flesh-and-blood couples. In addition, studies have offered some support for the theory that reporting is skewed by gender.¹²² For example, Stets and Straus analysed the results of the second Survey further in 1992 and concluded that men *do* under-report their own violent behaviour, particularly its more severe forms, and that this might perhaps have contributed to the apparent decrease in wife abuse since the first Survey. However, Gelles and Straus' public statements and most widely circulated publications have tended to underplay this important qualification. Stets and Straus then took only the women's reports as the baseline and recomputed the results in order to more accurately compare women's and men's violence rates. This produced roughly similar rates of violence: men and women had minor violence rates of 6.9 per cent and 7.7 per cent respectively, and severe violence rates of 4.9 per cent and 4.4 per cent. The researchers concluded from this that, because the male reporting bias had been corrected, women were about as violent as men. However, this still ignores

the possibility that women count more of their own behaviour and less of their husbands' behaviour, as violence.

On average then, in any CTS study relying on aggregated data, more of women's violence than men's may be being reported. This must also be considered in the light of those studies, including the second Survey itself, that have found men's violence to be in general more injurious than women's, and violent husbands to be violent more often.

The 'Truthfulness' of Claims

As well, there is the under-researched issue of whether men exaggerate some of their experiences at the hands of women into the category of 'severe violence', or even of 'minor violence'. The 1996 British Crime Survey discussed earlier is relevant to problems with the CTS, because although the British researchers did also investigate issues like how upset the respondent had been by the violence, their methodology has definitional difficulties too, over the meaning of some particular contexts of violence. The British report considers whether, based on similar rates of 12-month prevalence, men can be equally considered victims.¹²³ It suggests that on the one hand men could be more willing to report 'trivial' incidents that women victims would not, or that the rates might be the same but violence is experienced as less serious by men because they are usually bigger and stronger than their female partners. While the research does not investigate this, the report also suggests that it is likely that on the whole men have more options (e.g. financial) to leave the relationship if the violence does become serious. In any case, these kinds of factors would lead to many men not seeking official help, even though they might report violence against them for a survey. On the other hand, though, male victims may be less likely than female victims to admit a serious situation, for reasons like shame, embarrassment and machismo.

The interrelationship among factors like violent behaviour reporting, gender, shame and the 'normalisation' of men's violence needs to be researched. For instance, if women are found to be more likely than men to report their own violent behaviour and less likely to report violence against them, perhaps something like shame interacts with 'conscience' to produce a greater degree of 'owning up' about one's own violence

123 Mirrlees-Black 1999: 61-62

in the case of a woman. But this might be at least partly due as well to the fact that women's violence is not seen as 'normal'. In comparison, women subjected to violence from their husbands on a regular basis may take at least some of it for granted as 'usual' gender relations.¹²⁴

Claimants about violence against men by women often assert that men are too ashamed to report such behaviour even in victim surveys, hence the apparent under-representation of male victims (a claim similarly often made about male sexual abuse survivors compared to female). No systematic research appears to exist to show that shame operates *more* for male than for female victims, or that shame is even the most relevant factor, let alone how it might relate to the issue of women's violence as generally more 'abnormal' than men's. The concept of self-blame may have similar gendered differences. This is all complicated enough without also considering the relationship among the degree of *fear* experienced by the victim of violence, gender and reporting behaviour, let alone possible diversity *among* men and women according to social differences like culture.

Men's possible trivialisation of violence against them may also work both ways. Some men may experience their wives' actions as trivial even when survey methodology like that of the CTS classifies it as severe violence,¹²⁵ and so the act counts in the survey results but would not appear in official records. Alternatively, as suggested by the British report, factors like machismo may mean that men trivialise even violence they experience as serious, and so at best this shows up in studies as 'minor'.

In terms of the original CTS approach, the idea of over-reporting women's violence is unlikely to be broached in Gelles and Straus' research, given that the whole tenor of their work is to emphasise the seriousness of even apparently 'trivial' and tolerated violence. Nevertheless, it may make an important difference to the interpretation of statistics about 'husband-beating', especially when combined with the other limitations of the CTS.

The Context of Violence

One of the most obvious criticisms of the CTS is that it focuses on physical violence and not other typical forms of abuse, like sexual and psychological assaults, which are experienced by

¹²⁴ Whether violence is deemed normal also depends on the actual act, and perhaps again on the respondent's moral judgment of the behaviour. In *Behind Closed Doors*, the report on the 1st US national survey, respondents were asked how they felt about violence in the family. Husbands were significantly more likely than wives to see slapping as necessary and good, but husbands and wives were more equal on whether this was 'normal' (Straus et al 1980: 47-8).

¹²⁵ Saunders 1986: 49-50

abused women and which show up in other, particularly qualitative, research. There is a hierarchy of implied seriousness of acts, so that slapping is always worse than pushing or shoving, regardless of the size and strength of the person labelled as violent in each case. This in turn means that if a wife's behaviour passes over a threshold category in the scale – for instance, by kicking her husband – into the more severe violence range, her violence will automatically contribute to the 'severe violence against husbands' rate. For the same reason, as long as a husband's violence remains at the level of 'only' slapping or pushing and shoving, he will only contribute to 'minor violence' data, regardless of the consequences of his actions. Simply counting violent acts cannot explore the context of the violence and its meanings for those involved.

As an illustration, in the same time period as I was examining the CTS research, I watched the video *Losing Isaiah*, which is about a woman, played by Jessica Lang, who faces the prospect of losing her adopted son to his biological mother. There is a scene in which Lang's character is greatly distressed and is attempting to discuss the issue with her husband. He tries to calm her down, and she reacts by beating his chest with her fists, until he comforts her. This would register on the CTS as an act of violence, indistinguishable from that associated with an out-and-out mutual fight between a couple; and indistinguishable from an act by a man who has been battering his wife over a period of years. (In this last case, remember too that the family violence surveys only asked about the gender of the perpetrator for the previous year, not over the course of the relationship, and so there are no separate rates for men and women and any sense of a pattern over time.)

The restriction of the CTS to conflict situations is also problematic, as it fails to differentiate between contexts that are clearly about one person attempting to use their power to control the other, where sometimes there may be no obvious 'dispute'; and the kind of 'couple conflict' scenario with which most people in relationships are familiar, whether their behaviour would register on the scale or not. We might call the first kind of couple violence, 'patriarchal terrorist violence' (and for the moment begging the question of whether this form can ever involve the reverse gender scenario); and the second, 'common couple violence'.¹²⁶

The fuzzing of the two broad types in their operationalisation of violence has posed a problem for Gelles and Straus. They have tried to explain why it is that, despite the fact that refuge data and feminist research suggest there is a significant number of battered women, they do not show up in the CTS survey results as separate from at least some abused men, and from common couple violence, in the way we might expect. The issue, which is known as the 'representative sample fallacy', is complicated.¹²⁷ Essentially, it can be understood as highlighting some of the weaknesses of the CTS approach, and of quantitative research in general. These weaknesses can help to explain why in contrast, as outlined earlier, community studies using a modified CTS, and even crime surveys using more meaningful and inclusive definitions of domestic violence, have found much higher rates of women's victimisation. The limitations of the standard CTS approach are also related to the family violence theoretical framework, and its differences from feminist analysis.

The Family Violence and Feminist Frameworks Compared

Gelles and Straus do not have a genuinely distinct theory of domestic violence, as many feminists would call it. Instead, they connect violence involving couples to other forms of violence in the family, like child abuse, elder abuse and, perhaps more controversially, corporal punishment. The inclusion of corporal punishment as a form of family violence is important, because one of the fundamental elements of Gelles and Straus' framework is that violence is tolerated and even encouraged as a normal part of family interaction and more general social life. They see the violent practices and acts that are more socially condemned (at least officially) as being on a continuum with those forms of violence that many people seem to find perfectly acceptable. Partly for this reason, 'family violence' theorists tend to believe that unless there is a fundamental overhaul of the entire social system, a certain amount of violence will be inevitable.

This view is linked to their picture of the family as a setting in which violence is woven into the fabric of the family itself, to the extent that the family is 'a major institution of violence in our society'.¹²⁸ From Gelles and Straus' particular sociological

¹²⁷ See Atmore 2001

¹²⁸ Straus et al 1980: 16

stance, the family is a kind of pressure-cooker of differences and high expectations; with the capacity for both immense and unique satisfaction of needs, and incredible frustration and conflict. The family is not only a common location for violence but also a training ground for later life, as people learn from a young age that loving and hitting often go together (e.g. corporal punishment of children); that violence is morally right; and that violence is allowable as a last resort, especially as a response to the various stresses and pressures of life.

As might be expected from people who have been working in the area for nearly three decades, the body of work Gelles and Straus have produced is not entirely consistent. They have rethought some methodological and theoretical approaches, and differ from each other on some issues and emphases. Nevertheless, there are certain phrases that run like a mantra through their work, and that emphasise the 'normality' of violence in the family, both in terms of how common and how tolerated it is – for instance, 'violence between family members is probably as common as love'; 'the marriage licence is a hitting licence'; and 'people use violence because they can'. This perspective is backed up by the high rates of violence found in the research studies using the CTS.

Feminist readers may identify and agree with some of these arguments, and yet also dispute both their more controversial claims and their overall emphasis. For instance, family violence theorists underplay the existence of gender and power as key aspects in various kinds of violence. There is no sense in their framework of any comprehensive theoretical and political understanding of concepts like 'patriarchy' or 'male dominance', in which husbands' violence against wives is linked to a broader societal system in which gender relations are institutionalised. From that contrasting feminist perspective, a man's violence against his intimate partner is never *only* an individual or specific couple issue. This is not simply because each member of the couple is the product of specific gender socialisation and experience, but also due to the fact that a man's violence has a different meaning to a woman's and is treated differently by social institutions like the media and the courts.

Added to this, a man's violence towards his female partner must be seen in the context of a set of social arrangements where men as a group have power at the expense of women as a

group, and so violence by men in individual relationships can be understood as in various ways assisting the maintenance of the status quo.¹²⁹ It is not necessary for individual men to be aware of this, although it is noteworthy how many perpetrators' violence is not simply a form of expression of rage or frustration over conflict, but is a controlling response to their female partner's 'failure' to be a 'proper' wife in dominant patriarchal terms.¹³⁰ These kinds of themes go much deeper than the data elicited by quantitative family violence researchers.

As with the failings of the CTS research, Gelles' and Straus' theoretical approach to domestic violence is unable to specifically conceptualise power, control and coercion, and how they link concretely to both violence and gender (let alone other forms of oppression like racism). The family violence researchers therefore appear to confuse violence when the perpetrator is relatively powerful, and violence as an outcome of relative powerlessness. (Some people do not believe that the two are so easily distinguishable even in the one individual's experience, but Gelles and Straus seem to think it is possible to separate out these 'variables', and so set themselves this task.)

That problem is obvious when the issue of women's self-defence and pre-emptive strikes arises. Straus et al want to see these kinds of violence as understandable in the circumstances, but not acceptable in the sense of their overall condemnation of any kind of violence. The resulting stance ends up being too general, and tends to collapse even self-defence into the larger mix of violence that also includes deliberate battering. Data from CTS surveys also tell us nothing about if and how minor violence might escalate into severe violence, and any associated gender differences. For Straus and Gelles it is all simply 'violence', with the implication that all forms, whether patriarchal terrorist, common couple or something else, are equally serious and undesirable, and somehow have the same root cause.

While it is clear that Gelles and Straus' commitment to ending all violence means that they do want to make the case for women's violence against men to be taken seriously, they do not urge the same for feminist analysis. For the family violence researchers, gender is but one factor among many possible contributors to domestic violence, rather than a fundamental organising principle of social life that influences how we think, including about research. Coupled with their allegiance to the

¹²⁹ Breines and Gordon 1983, Yllö and Bograd 1988

¹³⁰ For example, Dobash and Dobash 1979

quantitative framework, this means that Gelles and Straus end up being drawn towards the same position of 'gender symmetry' of violence as their more clearly reactionary counterparts in the men's rights groups.

However, for all their problems, the family violence framework and the associated CTS studies still make some contribution to understanding domestic violence, as will be discussed in the last section of this Paper.

Recent Australian Research

A recent Australian study, while not as extensive as the US National Family Violence Surveys, took a comparable approach in being based on the CTS. Headey et al (1999) surveyed 1,643 people about domestic violence as part of an International Social Science Survey Australia's 1996-97 Family Interaction module. The survey asked questions about physical assault only, specifically about whether the respondent or their partner had: slapped, shaken or scratched the other; hit the other with a fist or an object; or kicked the other. Participants were also asked about threats and whether they had felt intimidated.

Of the sample, 4.7 per cent – 5.7 per cent of men and 3.7 per cent of women – reported having been assaulted in the past year, with 54 per cent of those reporting having been assaulted also reporting assaulting. More men claimed to have been assaulted than women reported assaulting, a finding that was only just statistically significant and that the researchers found hard to interpret. When the violence was analysed by category, there were equal rates of violence for men and women for all three categories. Reports of threats were not distinguished by gender, and there were no significant differences between women and men in terms of the frequency of infliction of injury leading to pain. The only significant gender difference was that more women than men said they had felt frightened and intimidated (7.6 per cent compared to 4.0 per cent).

These findings should be treated with caution on several grounds.¹³¹ First, the research is open to many of the criticisms previously made of CTS studies, such as the use of aggregate data and the fact that the researchers assumed that a gender symmetry in reporting rates meant there was no gender bias operating. Second, the questions were even more limited than those asked in the US family violence surveys. Finally, the find-

¹³¹ See also Flood 1999, Bagshaw and Chung 2000: 6-7

ings on injuries were contrary to both accepted studies and common knowledge that women's injuries tend to be more severe than men's. The Australian researchers themselves note:

*[T]he results here suggest that women inflict serious injuries at least as frequently as men. [This] needs treating with caution because it runs counter, not just to conventional belief, but also to medical and police records. Clearly, established beliefs cannot be overturned by one set of findings. These issues need further research.*¹³²

Later in the report the authors conclude that it is:

*hard to credit that women injure men as seriously as men injure women. We hope our measures of the severity of injury and pain were a reasonable first attempt. Nevertheless, in future work it will be important to compare subjective assessments of severity to more reliable and objective measures.*¹³³

As with some of the American media reception of Gelles and Straus' work, these kinds of caveats were not acknowledged by the Australian press and those who wished to use the study to back up their claims that women are just as violent domestically. Approaches by the media to DVIRC for comment about the Headey et al research eventually led to this Discussion Paper. The publications stemming from the research are actually very limited in number, and there are no plans by the investigative team to continue further with the topic.¹³⁴ The ripples made by this study demonstrate how the claims about men as victims already had an independent life, and were awaiting more fuel for their particular fire.¹³⁵

Since the most cited prevalence studies for domestic violence by women against men are still the US CTS surveys, with all of their failings, the parlous state of systematic research on male victims is therefore perhaps best summed up by Stark and Flitcraft: 'Though many men are clearly hit by their wives, figures on husband abuse vary too widely to determine the extent or seriousness of the problem.'¹³⁶ They continue:

More consistent figures on interspousal violence suggest a prevalence of from 12 per cent to 20 per cent, but again without establishing a firm basis for clinical concern. Only data on violence against women are

¹³² Headey et al 1999: 60

¹³³ Headey et al 1999: 61

¹³⁴ Dorothy Scott, pers. com.

¹³⁵ See for example, www.ecn.net.au/~mra

¹³⁶ See also Hegarty 1998: 33

*consistent across country, state, and national surveys. We can safely estimate that between 20 per cent to 25 per cent of the adult women in the United States have been physically abused at least once by a male intimate . . .*¹³⁷

Somewhat ironically, the higher estimates for women's victimisation quoted above also come from (modified) CTS research, some of which is carried out or cited (selectively) by feminists.¹³⁸ If we want more systematic research via which to compare the prevalence of men's and women's domestic violence victimisation, perhaps a better place to start is with Hegarty's (1998) Australian development of a multidimensional partner abuse measure, the Composite Abuse Scale, which so far has only been applied to women.¹³⁹

A Qualitative Picture

In contrast to the CTS-based studies, Bagshaw et al give a more qualitatively oriented picture, showing how a non-random sample can provide more meaningful, because richer, data about victims' experiences.¹⁴⁰ Their study portrays domestic violence as not just about physical assaults, and as connected to systematic processes of power and control. This research is particularly useful not only due to its being Australian but because, relatively unusually for qualitative work which has typically been associated with a feminist focus on women as victims of domestic violence, it also investigated the experiences of men.¹⁴¹ The report also includes discussions of young people, same-sex relationships, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, and Aboriginal communities (although without in-depth cross-over to the issue of male victims within these categories).

As outlined earlier, the contrast between such a study and the large-scale CTS research shows the strengths and weaknesses of both. Because the Bagshaw et al study used a phone-in from self-identified victims of domestic violence, it cannot be regarded as representative either of the general population or, although with less qualification, even of domestic violence victims in general (in part because the sample was also small). It therefore cannot give us the 'big picture' or 'hard facts' about how common domestic violence is, for both men and women.

137 Stark and Flitcraft 1988: 300

138 For example, Saunders 1986, Currie 1998, ABS 1996a

139 We must also find more effective ways to discover more about whether and how prevalence rates and characteristics of violence might differ *within* groups of women and men. The original US CTS surveys do separate out data from respondents such as 'Black' and 'Spanish' individuals, and according to some measure of socioeconomic status, but there are so many problems with the methodology that it is doubtful whether any useful conclusions can be drawn from this data.

140 2000. See also Bagshaw and Chung 2000: 10-11

141 Bagshaw et al 2000: 47-67

In the phone-in sample, nine out of 120 callers (7.5 per cent) were men in heterosexual relationships. The experiences described by these men show some similarities with the situations of women victims of partner violence in the study. For example, the reasons given for remaining in a violent and abusive relationship, the triggers for violent and abusive incidents, and feelings of shame and embarrassment over disclosing violence, were shared by male and female victims. However, there were also some important differences between men and women. The men were not usually living in ongoing fear of the perpetrator (21 per cent compared to 58 per cent of the women victims), and did not have previous experiences of violence in other relationships. Unlike the women, men tended not to experience violence or fear after they had separated from their partner, and the one exception was a 'far less severe' case than the situation for women victims.¹⁴²

A closer examination of the violent behaviours described by male victims suggests further important differences between men and women. For instance, while the types of physical abuse reported by men included probably relatively uncontentious acts like being choked, kicked in the ribs and kidneys, and threatened with a knife, there were also behaviours such as 'being rushed at', which are more open to interpretation in terms of seriousness and threat. This is especially so when we take into account the average size disparity between men and women. In contrast, women's experiences of physical abuse included a range of behaviours that did not appear at all in male victims' accounts, such as the actual use of weapons. As well as outright violence resulting in severe injuries that needed medical attention, there were intimidating behaviours such as dangerous driving, abusing pets in front of family members, physically assaulting the children, and sleep deprivation.

Bagshaw and Chung also report that while 50 per cent of the callers reported sexual abuse, this experience was recounted by only one man, and 'what he described was not similar to the experiences of most women'.¹⁴³ The man suffered from impotence and felt abused by demands from his 'highly sexed' partner.¹⁴⁴ In contrast, sexual abuse of the women 'ranged across the continuum from sexual pressure and coercion, comments about women's unattractiveness, [to] being forced to take part

142 Bagshaw and Chung 2000: 11. As another illustration, see Russell 1982: 102-105

143 Bagshaw and Chung 2000: 11

144 Bagshaw et al 2000: 54

in various sexual acts and penetrative rape'.¹⁴⁵ The verbal and emotional abuse of the men shared some features with the treatment of women victims, such as being personally denigrated. However, male perpetrators have a lexicon of abusive images and language about femininity to draw upon which has no counterpart for male victims.

An even more significant difference is apparent when some of the other verbally abusive behaviours reported by male victims are scrutinised. One man said that his partner had tried to manipulate him by claiming that he had sexually abused the children; while other accounts said that the partner had an 'instantaneous temper' and another had 'moody, bitchy behavior' – "she used to leave and go to her sister's".

Social and financial abuse were often experienced by women in terms like systematic social isolation, as well as being kept prisoner in the house, stalked, and having transport and keys controlled. These had no equivalent in the men's reports. Instead, Bagshaw et al found little social abuse among male victims, but rather reports like 'being denied a social life – "she went out without me" (he was from New Zealand and had no family or friends here)'. Other examples were a man's partner expressing her temper to the neighbours; and 'having a partner who would spend money irresponsibly when in a rage'.¹⁴⁶

Caution is needed in interpreting these claims by men of verbal/emotional and social/financial abuse. It is tempting for feminists, world-weary from working with profoundly victimised women, to simply dismiss or trivialise at least some of the male accounts as not 'real' or 'serious' violence. This also links to a recent tendency in feminist thinking to problematise the notion of 'victimhood' (which was originally a concept developed by feminists in the 1970s, as part of drawing public attention to the traumatic impact and social seriousness of violence against women such as rape and domestic violence). Describing assaulted women as 'victims' also emphasised, contrary to popular beliefs, that what had happened to them was not their fault.

While many feminists have also criticised the term 'victim' and preferred to describe assaulted women as 'survivors', it is still the case that a woman has a much greater chance of obtaining public sympathy, and at least some access to institutionalised 'justice', if she can be portrayed as a 'deserving' or a 'good' victim.¹⁴⁷ For example, the scenario of a 'well behaved'

145 Bagshaw et al
2000: 22

146 Bagshaw et al
2000: 22

147 Smart 1989:
26-49, 1990

(and probably white) schoolgirl who is attacked by a complete stranger while walking home from school is much more likely to receive extensive and sympathetic (if also gratuitous) coverage in a tabloid newspaper, than the case of an adult woman who has had more than one sexual partner and has been raped by an acquaintance.¹⁴⁸

By the 1980s and 1990s, claiming victim status had become much more widely used by individuals and groups to legitimate their particular narratives. Feminists are increasingly criticising the way in which 'victimhood' has become both detached from its original political movement and, in some cases, has provided an apparently unassailable position from which to make anti-feminist claims.¹⁴⁹ It is salient here that Bagshaw et al encountered some male callers who identified as victims because *their* violent behaviour (which from their accounts seemed to have taken place, although they refused the label of perpetrator) had been reported to authorities.¹⁵⁰

Some of the more legitimate examples of victimisation given by men seem to back up my earlier suggestion that the reporting of violence is shaped by gendered assumptions, including the results that men, relatively speaking, 'play up' women's violence, and that women downplay men's. As one illustration, it seems likely that for those women reporting violent assault, the fact that at other times the perpetrator is just plain moody or bad tempered is either grounds for realistic fear of worse to come, or else probably not worthy of special comment (and may be even felt as a respite). At issue here is whether including men's experiences of women's 'moodiness' or 'bitchiness' as violence helps to create a realistic overview of the patterns of violence that we wish to define as a serious social problem. This is especially salient if men are likely to report this type of behaviour as victimisation, and women are not. At the same time though, at least some of the apparently less seriously victimised men probably experience genuine pain at this treatment from their partner. There is also an important feminist tradition of believing first person claims of victimisation and accepting the victim's/survivor's own ranking of the severity,¹⁵¹ as well as a series of historical lessons about 'cover-ups' of unpalatable forms of violence.¹⁵²

Finally, the identification by Bagshaw et al of a difficulty in distinguishing between being victims and perpetrators in men's

148 Soothill and Walby 1991

149 Atmore 1993, Armstrong 1994, Lamb 1999

150 Bagshaw and Chung 2000: 10. Bagshaw et al do not count these men among the nine victims they discuss. There are various similarities between the results of this study and the stories of men given in Cook (1997: 38-87). However, unlike Cook, Bagshaw et al also note the men's tendency to minimise their own violent behaviour.

151 For example, Kelly 1988

152 For example, Gordon 1988

accounts is not limited to those obvious perpetrators who use claims of victimisation to deflect responsibility for their own violent behaviour. Some other men found it hard to articulate their experience of being a victim; others said or implied that the violence was mutual, or found some behaviours ambiguous.¹⁵³

These themes go to the heart of the ways in which the cultural demands of 'victimhood' can be seen to shape the entire issue of whether men can ever be 'legitimate' victims of domestic violence. On the one hand, being a victim has enough currency that an accused perpetrator can simply use it as a claim to deflect responsibility for his behaviour. But on the other hand, it may be that for some men the intertwining of both being assaulted and being violent is more typical than it is for women. This appears to be true of the relationship between men and violence more generally, such as on the sports field or in pub brawls. Yet as long as being a 'good' victim – that is, 'innocent' and therefore deserving of sympathy and justice – requires the individual to be beyond any reproach, it is harder for genuine victims in such 'mixed' contexts to be legitimated.

Once this is examined, it can be seen that these themes also work against women, who (as is all too well known by feminists) must present the 'deserving' image in forums like court and the media in order for their experiences to be taken seriously. This means too that those women who themselves have used violence in some way, are – perhaps like male victims for whom this seems to be the context more often – unlikely to be accepted as also victims.¹⁵⁴ Whether and how someone is able to successfully claim victim status will also always be shaped by their particular gendered life circumstances, as well as their other various locations in relations of power.

Some of these victimhood issues are at work more broadly in the claims and counter-claims about men as victims.¹⁵⁵ As Pease has pointed out, the more extreme 'men's rights' positions back up their assertions both by claiming that men are victimised generally as a gender, and by attacking women's claims to victim status. They do so by attempting to undermine women's implied status as only victims, criticising the extent of the violence against women that is being claimed, and also – especially importantly – arguing that women are actually perpetrators.¹⁵⁶ This latter claim works to legitimate the claims that men are the victims of women, and that women cannot possibly

153 Bagshaw et al 2000: 52-65

154 Renzetti 1999: 48-9

155 See also Bagshaw et al 2000: 50-51

156 Pease 1996

be victims nearly as much as feminists claim because they cannot be both aggressors and victims. Even more 'moderate' stances advancing claims about male victimisation use some of these arguments. They probably would not need to be advanced if it were not necessary to counter the view that, because men as a social group are associated with the perpetration of violence against women, it is somehow inconsistent to also talk about male victims, especially at the hands of women. It is as if, because men as a social group have benefits at the expense of women, it cannot also be acknowledged that men both pay a price to maintain the oppressor role, and can also at times be something other than only oppressing.

A recent small study by Amanda Barclay (2000) offers further insights. Barclay interviewed 14 workers from a range of victim services in Melbourne about their views of the experiences and needs of male victims of violence by their female partners. She was particularly interested in Connell's (1987) concept of 'hegemonic masculinity', i.e. the dominant and most accepted patriarchal mode of ideas and practices to do with being a man. Hegemonic masculinity therefore also usually idealises 'a man' as white, middle class, heterosexual and able bodied.

Barclay's study investigated how hegemonic masculinity might shape both the support services that do exist for male victims, and how and if men seek and use such services. The study cannot tell us anything about the prevalence of men's victimisation, and it is clear that the workers' comments refer to a broader range of victimisation than just spouse abuse. The reports on the men are so few that they are anecdotal rather than substantive evidence. The accounts are also filtered through workers' perceptions, rather than directly presenting what the men say themselves. Nevertheless, the findings overlap with the results of the Bagshaw et al study in suggesting that men's experiences of abuse can be multi-faceted rather than limited to obvious physical assault, and that such experiences can sometimes be difficult to name clearly as abuse. Barclay gives three case studies. The first was of a jockey who followed his relationship and child to another city, and was subsequently denied access to the child and abused by his partner's family. He was vulnerable to such treatment because he had no money, food or shelter. The second man was abused by a mentally ill wife who also caused him great anxiety when off medication by

taking their child. In the third example, the man used alcohol as form of escape from his physically abusive wife who would 'wait up for him' with a household tool and beat him up. He felt too weak and victimised to change the situation.

Barclay's study is an important beginning. It suggests that gender is central not only to women's but also to *men's* experiences of victimisation, and their subsequent decisions and help-seeking experiences. Gender is salient here in two ways: first in the sense that hegemonic masculinity shapes how men respond to being victimised. For instance, while class and other cultural variations are important, generally there is strong pressure for male victims to maintain a demeanor of invulnerability, even though one of the reasons why they often feel traumatised is precisely because of the threat that being a victim poses to dominant notions of how a man should be defined. As a consequence, men tend not to attend counselling or to adopt other early treatment measures, and are likely to contact crisis services only when they are desperate. Alternatively, the problem may be addressed indirectly (as in the victimised man attending couples counselling for his drinking habits).

However, the second significant aspect of gender is that its dominant forms are not monolithic. While men's experiences in general may be shaped by hegemonic masculinity, all men are not the same. Within specific types of masculine cultures, for instance living as a particular kind of Turkish man in Australia, 'being a man' can involve some subordination in terms of the dominant ideal, but also some trade-offs in which a particular 'alternative' masculinity still gets its status and benefits at the expense of femininity in that particular setting. Men's experiences and actions are also not simply determined by the demands of the hegemonic, or even a locally dominant, masculinity. The fact that some men do seek help and admit to feeling weak and vulnerable shows that being strong and inviolate is not the *only* way men can behave and feel. Barclay's albeit limited study suggests that support services may lag behind in their understanding of the plurality of masculinities (and by association, femininities), by still tending to be structured by the default position of domestic violence and the notion of men only as offenders, and women only as victims.

Some of the same themes emerge in research on men's experiences of violence more generally. The demands of masculinity

entail a certain amount of 'normal' violence that 'real men' are expected to both give and take stoically, as well as more punitive forms of violence that those who are deemed insufficiently masculine often endure.¹⁵⁷ Hegemonic masculinity is therefore something that has to be constantly achieved and defended.¹⁵⁸ Perhaps some men's rights stances, however misogynist, are protesting against the assumption that because male power undeniably exists and subjugates women a lot of the time, there are no cracks in the facade and no room for other ways of experiencing being male – including being subject to other, harder-to-pin-down and fluctuating forms of power such as those in intimacy, that often involve women.¹⁵⁹ It is therefore not surprising that in the dominant and limited framework of understanding, men and women are set up to compete for the status of victimhood.¹⁶⁰ Men's rights groups and family violence researchers – and some feminists – do not acknowledge that violence can be 'messy' and unpredictable in its origins, locations, forms and consequences. It is not one homogeneous phenomenon.

Challenges for Future Thinking about Male Victims and Violence

*We must be open to our own blinkers and refuse to simplify the complexities of our findings, even if this means we ask questions that might be uncomfortable.*¹⁶¹

For all its many problems, the CTS seems to identify a high prevalence of a certain kind of violence from both intimate partners toward the other. This is probably best described by the concept of 'common couple violence'. Describing violence in this way should not automatically imply that it can never be severe or traumatic. Nevertheless, common couple violence might be better separated from violence that is clearly heavily one-sided, even if in that second scenario the victim is also acting violently in self-defence or to pre-empt beatings. In practice, perhaps both forms of violence can be associated with some couples at different stages, and we probably do not yet know enough.

The 'heavily one-sided violence' can be conceptualised as linked to a pattern of power and control. It is epitomised by

157 Stanko and Hobdell 1993, Newburn and Stanko 1994

158 Connell 1987

159 See for example, Cook 1997: 38-87

160 Renzetti 1994

161 Stanko 1997: 85

'patriarchal terrorism' or what feminists understand as domestic violence. The word 'terrorism' is apt to convey the systematic intimidation effect of such behaviour, in which the victim is likely to live in fear. Qualitative studies suggest that this particular pattern of violence is typically gendered as male perpetrator and female victim. The CTS is much worse at identifying this form of violence. The crucial issue then becomes not so much specific acts of violence themselves – which already have problems of operationalisation in the CTS in any case, including the fact that only physical aggression is counted – but rather whether their context is power and coercion, or more of a couple conflict. It would seem likely though, that most common couple violence is more minor, and most terrorist violence is severe, or at least has a greater potential to be so.

It is in terrorist violence that gendered power becomes most significant; hence Johnson's phrase, 'patriarchal terrorism'. However, the perpetration of common couple violence will also be shaped by wider gender relations, in terms of how each member of the couple behaves and responds. As far as male victims of their female partners' violence are concerned then (those whose experience is decided to be legitimate – sensitive in itself), the question is whether their experiences all fall into 'common couple' situations, or whether it is possible that a wife's violence can be understood as sometimes belonging to the 'terrorist' category. Or is it, sometimes at least, something else again?

It is easy to see how a wife's violence against her husband, when he is also aggressive against her (or has been in the past) may be classified as part of common couple violence or as self-defence to abuse. But what about the scenario where she is clearly the perpetrator and he does not behave violently, or simply defends himself? Can a man be an abused husband in the sense of being subject to his wife's controlling and coercive behaviour?

While anecdotes are not social science 'proof', they can convey some important themes and issues, as suggested at various points in this Discussion Paper. This third story is from DVIRC's own website, which began collecting stories from young women and now includes two accounts from men.

Whenever anything went wrong, she'd blame me. Anyway, it turned into a living nightmare within a year of being married. She took every opportunity to belittle me. When in a temper, she often hit me but never

on the face. I thought I deserved it because I was withdrawn and a bad husband — that's what she kept saying. She forced me to have sex to become a good husband for her. I couldn't leave because that would have meant leaving my children.

I tried to tell my mother but what little I told she said, 'What are you doing to make her behave that way?' I felt abandoned by everyone except the kids. After 4 years my wife said she was leaving. Everyone said the breakup was my fault. I never told anyone what really happened. Four years later I finally had the courage to tell a counsellor that I went to because of depression after I lost my job. I had no close friends by then . . . It was the worst time of my life . . .

The counsellor was good because she helped me see that it was abuse. She used the word rape and I now know that's what it was like in the bedroom. It's amazing but I didn't think of it that way before. I was living in a naive cloud and had no words to describe my confusion and terror. There are so many confused thoughts especially the nagging feeling that somehow you are the one to blame, the mad person.¹⁶²

Certainly, at least from anecdotal and some scanty research evidence, and if we take men claiming victimisation at their word (as we would women), then some men do experience fear and a pattern of control along with severe forms of violence, including physical aggression. But even at this extreme, it may not be useful to consider it 'domestic violence'; at least not in the same way as the phrase is used to refer to women who are abused by their male partners. Women *as women* do not have the social group power, and even 'fear' and 'control' may not be the same phenomena for men. To put it another way, regardless of the wife's violent actions, the wider structural forces and arrangements that work to oppress women to men's benefit do not seem to back up *her* violence in a systematic manner — at least at first glance. In male-dominant societies, a man is not abused by his wife *as a man* in a way that reinforces his powerlessness. However, this does not mean that being a man is irrelevant to his experience of the violence. His embodiment as a particular man, and his specific socialisation, will both shape how he relates to the victimisation.

Here, as suggested earlier, hegemonic masculinity comes into play, offering the privileges of maleness, although for a

¹⁶² From David's story, home.vicnet.au/~girlsown/ReadStories.htm

price; and which some men may never be able to completely and successfully negotiate. In the case of a victimised man, regardless of his various social locations, hegemonic masculinity can only offer denial. To acknowledge having been the victim of violence brings home the instability of taken-for-granted notions about what a man is – and shows up in stark form the constant possibility that ‘real men’ do not ‘naturally’ fit into this regime. Viewing the position of victimised men against this backdrop shows how the lack of refuges and services for men, however this may also be related to the prevalence of the problem, is certainly due to factors far more significant than the ‘feminist denial’ and other causes asserted by men’s rights groups. These factors are as profoundly connected to gendered domination, in their own way, as are issues in women’s victimisation.¹⁶³

Family violence theory is an important reminder to those feminists who want to understand intimate violence as only being about gender. It does at least start to pay more attention to the significance of some other issues of structured power (such as unemployment, that regularly features as a risk factor in surveys of domestic violence). Feminist postmodernist attention to power relations and their interconnections also insists that gender is not the sole consideration. Contemporary feminism must draw on its more recent awareness that other fields of power such as racism, sexuality, class and specific cultural norms may have greater significance in some particular contexts of intimate violence. This is especially salient for understanding situations where women may be perpetrators. In these contexts, concepts like ‘patriarchy’ still have relevance but cannot offer the full explanation, any more than can family violence researchers’ generalised understanding of ‘violence’. For instance, what if a husband was subject to class or racial discrimination that worked in favor of his wife, or suffered ill health? As an example, results of the 1996 British Crime Survey suggest that people, especially if they are young men, are more likely to be victims of domestic violence if they have a long-term illness or disability.¹⁶⁴

What all forms of violence within couples appear to share is the potent climate of intimacy in which emotions and behaviour have a freer rein than in all other social relationships. The family violence approach is particularly useful here in identify-

¹⁶³ Readers could also consider the differences in public attitudes and institutional responses to men’s compared to women’s violent behaviour.

¹⁶⁴ Mirrlees-Black 1999: 32-33

ing the ways in which, via families within larger violent societies, violence can become entangled with love, as that emotion is constructed psychically for us from infancy onwards – with all its needs, dependencies and frustrations. Issues of personal power and dependency can be complex and also fluctuating. They are not always identifiable in any clear-cut way as belonging solely to one or other partner, even while they may also be cut across by other power dynamics. Most importantly, the dynamics of intimacy itself may reinforce a man's (or indeed a woman's) feelings of trauma and powerlessness to leave the relationship, even if 'on paper' there are no structural forces to prevent him from doing so. We might want to call this type of situation in which a victimised man finds himself – albeit probably quite rarely – 'abuse'. There may be some useful insights here in the small but growing, mainly North American literature on battering and other violence in same-sex couples. Obviously in these cases there is no straightforward gendered power disparity between perpetrator and victim, yet researchers argue that at least some of this violence should be called abuse.¹⁶⁵

However, we may also want to continue to distinguish this kind of men's victimisation from the default picture of domestic violence, not only because it seems far less likely to occur, but because there are other characteristics that set it apart from the situation where a woman is assaulted by her husband. Here it might be helpful to consider Stark and Flitcraft's distinction between 'abuse' and 'battering'.¹⁶⁶ Abuse describes the level and pattern of violence from an intimate experienced by those we think of in Australia as victims/survivors of domestic violence. Battering refers to a syndrome that includes: a whole history of trauma from various forms of violence, including often sexual assault; a 'multi-problem profile' including general medical complaints and risk of ill health and other abuse; as well as unsuccessful help-seeking. Stark and Flitcraft argue that, while both husbands and wives can be abused, so far battering has been identified only among women victims. This does not mean that men can never be battered according to these researchers' understanding of the term; but more in-depth evidence is needed.

The minefield around terminology indicates that we still need better ways to talk about the default picture of domestic

¹⁶⁵ See for example, Renzetti and Miley 1996, Bergen 1998, Bagshaw et al 2000: 107-122

¹⁶⁶ 1988: 301

violence, let alone our lack of a vocabulary for women's assaulting behaviour and men's victimisation. Research on, for want of a better overall phrase at present, 'domestic violence', needs to be able to assess each violent situation according to its own particular relevant sets of power relations. This does not mean discounting or trivialising behaviour that is agreed to be violence; but nor does it mean understanding different forms of violence – which may have their own particular causes, characteristics and consequences – as simply 'more of the same'. As Claire Renzetti puts it:

When I look at the data that have been collected by both feminist and non-feminist researchers, I see strong evidence that women's and men's violence are both quantitatively and qualitatively different. That women are sometimes violent in intimate relationships does not diminish the importance of discerning the role that gender plays in the etiology and perpetration of intimate violence. If women use violence in intimate relationships, we should not assume that they are 'acting like men'.¹⁶⁷

It is understandable that some women and feminists working against the vaster and seemingly intractable spectrum of violence against women feel threatened by claims about male victimisation. There are sometimes good reasons to be suspicious about the agenda behind such claims, as this Discussion Paper has outlined. There is also some, again understandable, resentment that at times male victimisation has seemed to receive funding and support with an ease denied to feminist groups' long campaigns, and that this in some cases has weakened or seems likely to directly compromise services for women. But at the same time, there are many male victims – most of whom, it is important to reiterate, have been subjected to violence from *male* perpetrators – who still feel that there is no or little space for them in public claims about violence.

It is possible to view all efforts against violence as part of the same overall goal of eradicating abuse of people by others, without collapsing everyone's experiences and responsibilities into a homogeneous mass that takes no account of both violence in all its pluralities and overall patterns of power relations – including, importantly, gender. Widening our acknowledgment of violence in various ways may also mean that

¹⁶⁷ Renzetti (1999: 45). See also Hamberger and Potente 1994; and Stanko 1997 (esp. 85), who advocates a similar approach to understanding the meanings of sexual abuse.

instead of only Perpetrators with a capital 'P' and their strong association with criminal justice approaches, there will emerge an increased need to learn more from community and restorative justice models and their associated reintegration of men (and women?) who use violence; at least in some instances. Broadening the picture of causes and effects of violence and possibilities for treatment and prevention in this way takes white feminists closer to the 'family violence' understanding of domestic violence favoured by many Aboriginal people.¹⁶⁸ It also might help move same-sex relationship violence closer to core service awareness and support.

Feminists therefore need to think more about what forms of violence (including those other than physical force, and acts by women against men) we would want to call domestic violence, or abuse, or something else. For example, for all their faults, the American CTS studies did identify a high rate of verbal or psychological aggression for both husbands and wives.¹⁶⁹ How do we understand women's violent behaviour in intimate relationships, and how does it relate to forms of oppression that we find intolerable? This work may require us to juggle our concerns for various forms of social justice, so that we do not fall into the trap of making one victim's claims compete against another's, or excusing anyone's violent behaviour, even if they too may have been subjected to abuse in some way in another context.

On a broader level, as longtime anti-violence feminists Claire Renzetti and Elizabeth Stanko argue, this does not mean sacrificing a political understanding of the pervasiveness of male domination of women, but rather perhaps complicating it. Workers in the field already deal with many of these dilemmas and complexities. Perhaps what we are not so familiar with is the idea that how we think about violence can itself be part of the problem. Being more alert to claims about who is violent, and the underlying rationale for such statements, may be part of the solution.

Afterword

Feminists of all persuasions have acted from a basis that the personal is political. In other words, on the one hand anyone's personal life is shaped by and part of a larger framework of sociopolitical forces; and on the other, understanding the

¹⁶⁸ Bagshaw et al 2000: 123-140, MacDonald 1998: 12-14

¹⁶⁹ The original CTS described these acts as 'verbal' and a subsequent slightly modified version, the CTS2, calls them 'psychological'. The two US National Surveys did not count such behaviour as violence.

ways in which power relations work must include examining the level of the individual life. For this reason, women's reflections on their own experiences have been a crucial aspect of feminist theory and practice.

This Discussion Paper has, appropriately enough, taken a reasonably dispassionate tone in its attempt to unpack, fairly and logically, the various facets of the issue of men as victims of domestic violence. Yet in writing it I, like any other author, have brought my own particular set of social locations and experiences to the task.¹⁷⁰ In engaging with the specific approach to violence in the CTS research, I have found myself being drawn, as if through a magazine pop quiz, into thinking about where my own responses to the family violence surveys might place me on the violence spectrum. It has been both disconcerting and ironic to realise, and begin to accept, that the CTS – for all its quantitative-linked faults – confronts me with my own implication in violent behaviour in a way that feminist research has not done.

While grappling with this more gut-level grasping of what feminists have said for many years about the 'normality' of violence, I was roused from my desk one day by the sound of breaking glass and raised voices across the street. When I looked out of the window, I could see a man beating a woman about her body with an iron bar. When I got there, the man drove off and it became less and less clear from talking with bystanders whether the woman was a perpetrator or a victim, or both. It seemed she had some sort of grievance against a shop and had broken the glass door, threatening staff and passers-by with the large jagged shards, including the man who had hit her with the bar, who appeared to have retaliated out of the blue.

While all of this was swirling in my mind, I approached her and asked if she needed help, somehow still stuck with an image of her as only a victim of the man with the bar. Her response was to wheel on me in a rage that clearly communicated 'back off', and I did. She was patently also distressed as well as angry, and a threat not only to others, but to herself. I was interested to observe a calm in myself about her potential violence, despite the clear good sense of keeping out of her way. I could not work out why I had that response, except that I had, via my work on this Discussion Paper, found some sort of partial identification with her – which I am increasingly feeling is necessary for feminist work on women's – and perhaps all – violence.

¹⁷⁰ These will both shape my own narrative of violence and perhaps influence readers' interpretation of it, with two examples here being my whiteness and generally middle class experience.

I could not imagine myself responding in that fashion to a man threatening violence, and I am still unsure why (the glass was somewhat of an equaliser for any strength disparity she might have had in comparison, and she was a big woman). To complicate matters even further, the police took some time to come, the woman was African, and so I became increasingly undecided whether their approach was likely to be useful for anyone or not. Ultimately she disappeared before they arrived, and I wondered what had become of her, until a few days later one of our workers reported that they had seen her, seeming cheerful, in the street.

Finally, over the weeks I have worked on this project, studying the research and the claims and counter-claims about whether domestic violence is gender symmetrical, I have often caught the train home in the early evening from the station near work. I have tried while working to evenly assess all the evidence, or at least to point readers to where they can explore the issues more fully for themselves. When I have still been reflecting on these themes at the train station, the platform and its environs have often been dominated by young men. Loud, aggressive, and trying to achieve confidence through bluster, they take up most of the space, and I find myself resenting it. The few lone young women assertive enough to take public transport at night are unobtrusive, or obviously intimidated. On the train the pattern is sometimes repeated, especially on football nights.

Perhaps when these ordinary activities appear not so gender-stratified, it will be one small but significant marker of a society where domestic violence is no longer a gendered power and control issue. Whether domestic violence could then still be said to exist is a further issue for feminists to contemplate.

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