



Concordance between partners in “intimate terrorism”: A comparison of two typologies☆



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ABSTRACT

This article analyses “Intimate Terrorism” (IT) in relationships of 14,252 university student couples. A unique conceptual and methodological contribution is conceptualizing and measuring IT at the couple-level using *Dyadic Concordance Types* (DCTs) to identify three DCTs: *Male-Only IT*, *Female-Only IT*, and *Both IT*. Data from female as well as male participants found 51% of couples *Both IT*, 16% *Male-Only*, 33% *Female-Only*. These percentages are similar to most other studies which empirically compared men and women IT, including comparisons based on child reports of inter-parent violence. They contradict Johnson's assertion that IT is almost exclusively male. The theoretical implication is that, like other forms of partner abuse, understanding IT can be enhanced when it is conceptualized as a characteristic of couples, not just of individuals. A critique of Johnson's criteria to identify IT concludes it is inadequate to identify cases which correspond to what is implied by “terrorism.” The research and clinical implication are that if the concept of IT is used, the data analysis or treatment plan can benefit from by identifying the cases as *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, or *Both IT*.

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1. Intimate terrorism and situational couple violence

IT is defined by Johnson as a situation in which a partner uses coercive control to establish and maintain a *general* level of dominance in the relationship. It involves more than winning one specific conflict. Although the name IT may suggest extreme physical violence, the main focus is on coercive control. The criteria to identify IT includes acts of physical assault, but they do not have to be severe. According to Johnson, there can be IT without acts of physical assault when coercive control is prevalent. The other main category in Johnson's typology is situational couple violence (SCV). SCV involves little escalation and there tends to be a similar rate of perpetration by men and women. The violence that occurs when there is SCV is in relation to specific conflicts, not behavior intended to establish and maintain dominance in general.

The IT versus SCV typology has attracted wide interest. A search of Google Scholar for the period January 2000 to August 2013 revealed 204 papers mentioning “intimate terrorism.” There are several reasons for the wide interest. First, both the operational and theoretical definition of IT allocates a central place to *coercive control* in understanding

PV. There is wide agreement on the need to end coercive control in marital and dating relationships. Second, the IT-SCV typology recognizes the *heterogeneous* nature of PV. Third, the distinction between IT and SCV, in principle, permits theoretical progress and more focused treatment and prevention because it recognizes the diversity in PV, including that different manifestations may have different causes, different developmental trajectories, and different effects. Fourth, the IT vs SCV typology is a *couple-level* approach which recognizes that PV is a dyadic phenomenon, even when only one partner is violent. Fifth, the IT-SCV typology is perceived as resolving the gender symmetry dispute because it provides a place for cases of primary interest to both sides of the dispute. The interests of those concerned with male perpetration as a means of establishing and maintaining male dominance are addressed by the IT category. At the same time, the SCV category addresses the concerns of those who believe it is crucial to attend to the theoretical and practice implication of the more than two hundred empirical studies which found about the same percent of women and men perpetrate assaults on a partner.

This article focuses on two typologies intended to help identify, investigate treat partner abuse. Both are distinctive in using a *couple-level* measurement of abuse. Couple-level means that the measurement is based on the behavior of both partners and classifies and analyzes couples as social units in addition to the behavior of individual partners. It is important to take the characteristics of couples per se into account because, like individuals, each couple has a history and ongoing patterns of behavior. The first approach is a well-known typology in which the primary focus is to classify the relationship as being one in which

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there is “Intimate Terrorism” (IT) versus “Situational Couple Violence” (SCV) (Johnson, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). This dichotomous classification is part of a typology of violent behaviors that includes two other categories: Violent Resistance and Mutual Violent Control. The IT versus SCV distinction has been the main focus of interest and is the focus of this article. The second approach is a recently introduced typology called *Dyadic Concordance Types* (DCTs) (Straus, 2015). It classifies couples into three categories: *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, and *Both* in respect to any type of abuse, including IT or almost any behavior or characteristic that is theoretically or clinically relevant, such as sexual coercion (Michel-Smith & Straus, 2015). For this article, the relationships were classified into *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, or *Both* Intimate Terrorist (IT).

2. Dyadic concordance types

The concept of *Dyadic Concordance Types* (DCTs) is recent, but the unique importance of one of the three types (*Male-Only*) has been central since the start of efforts to reduce partner abuse. This type has been identified by terms such as “battered women” to designate relationships in which the female partner is assaulted but is not herself violent. More recently, *bi-directional* violence has been increasingly recognized (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Selwyn, & Rohling, 2012). Their review of 48 empirical studies found that about half of cases of PV are in the *Both* DCT. Another step forward has been studies which group cases into three categories of victim only, perpetrator only, and victim-perpetrator (Melander, Noel, & Tyler, 2010). DCTs also use the three logically possible categories resulting from crossing behavior by the male and female partners, but gives attention to the crucial role of gender in heterosexual partner violence by identifying the three types as *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, or *Both* assaulted.

An important characteristic of DCTs is that, like the IT-SCV typology, DCTs give empirical attention to both sides of the 35 year dispute over symmetry in perpetration of partner violence. DCTs assure that the cases of primary interest to those concerned with addressing male-perpetration are identified, and that the cases of primary interest to those concerned with addressing violence from a dyadic family systems perspective are also identified.

3. Objectives

The broad objective is to provide greater understanding of IT by using Dyadic Concordance Types (DCTs) and by an analysis of the method developed by Johnson to identify IT. The more specific objectives are:

1. When IT is part of a relationship, to estimate the percent of such couples in which only the male partner, only the female partner, or both meet Johnson's criteria for IT.
2. Use these results to evaluate the idea that IT is almost entirely a behavior of men.
3. Critically analyze the methodology used to identify IT and suggest ways the problems identified can be rectified.
4. Suggest the implications of the results for enhancing research, treatment, and prevention of aggression and violence in family relationships.

4. Method

This study analyzed data from the International Dating Violence Study. The data set, questionnaire, and all other key documents can be downloaded from the Inter-university Consortium For Political And Social Research (<http://dx.doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR29583>). The sample size for the current article is slightly larger than a previous study using the same data set (Straus & Gozjolko, 2014) because it used data which, after multiple imputation to replace missing data was slightly larger. It includes 10,175 women and 4097 men at 68 universities.

Both methodological articles such as Straus (2009) and numerous articles presenting results in peer reviewed journals such as (Douglas & Straus, 2006; Gamez-Guadix, Straus, & Hershberger, 2011; Hines, 2007; Straus, 2004, 2008, 2009; Straus & Gozjolko, 2014) demonstrate concurrent and construct validity of key measures in the IDVS data set.

5. Measure of intimate terrorism

Identification of IT followed procedures confirmed by Johnson (personal communication, 2006). We first classified each study participant and their partner as either having assaulted the partner in the previous 12 months (coded 1 or 0). As specified by Johnson, the measure does *not* differentiate minor assaults such as slapping a partner from severe assaults such as choking and punching. Then we identified ITs among those who assaulted as those who also had a coercive control score at or above the 90th percentile. This high cut point was used to be consistent with the cut points used by Johnson, such as 2.5 SD above the mean. He used such high levels of coercive control to identify ITs as those who are not among the 90% of cases he asserts are Situational Couple Violence (SCV). The coercive control scale used is described in (Straus & Gozjolko, 2014).

The four categories of Johnson's typology do not include one for *female* IT, except as part of the “Violent Resistor” type, i.e., in a relationship with male perpetrated IT. Like Frankland and Brown (2014), we therefore developed a more inclusive typology, presented in Straus and Gozjolko (2014), to allow for each of the logically possible combinations of assault and high coercive control by each gender. Additional information on the procedure to measure IT for each partner is found in Straus and Gozjolko (2014).

6. Dyadic types of intimate terrorism

Dyadic types for IT classify each *couple* in which IT occurred, into whether it was *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, or *Both* IT. To do this, each partner was coded 1 if they met Johnson's criteria for IT and 0 if they did not. This indicates the percent of *individual* men and women classified IT, but it does not identify which of the *couples* were *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, or *Both* IT. Hypothetically, 10% of the men and 10% of the women could be ITs, and at the same time, there could no relationships in the *Both* DCT. It is possible that all the male ITs were in relationships with women who were *not* ITs; and similarly, all the female ITs were coupled with men who are not ITs. To identify the couple-level IT, we cross-tabulated the variables measuring whether the participant was classified as an IT with whether his or her partner was classified as an IT. The percent in each of the four cells are the percent in each of the three DCT and in the referent category, Neither IT.

7. Results

7.1. Gender differences in physical assault and intimate terrorism

7.1.1. Assault

As has been found in many studies in the last 40 years, the percent who assaulted was larger in this study of students than in general population surveys (Archer, 2000; Gover, Park, Tomsich, & Jennings, 2011; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Specifically, 24% of the male students and 33% of the female students physically assaulted their partner in the 12 month period covered by the survey. Most of those assaults were “minor” such as slapping and throwing things that could hurt. However, a substantial percent were not trivial incidents. Eight percent of the men and 11% of the women perpetrated severe assaults such as choking, kicking, and punching (Straus, 2008). Moreover, 7% of the women in this study and 6% of the men suffered a physical injury as a result.

7.1.2. Intimate terrorism

The next step was to determine the percent of students who perpetrated an assault who were *also* high in coercive control, and therefore, using Johnson's criterion, were ITs. This identified 6.9% of the men and 7.1% of the women as IT (Chi-square 1.94 $p = 0.09$).

Caution is needed in respect to these percentages because they do not take into account which partner provided the data. The percent IT could be affected by whether it is estimated on the basis of data provided by men or women. The calculations were therefore repeated for each gender separately, and for whether they were asked about their own behavior or that of their partner, and differences were found. We first used *self-reports* on perpetration and found that 5.2% of men and 9.0% of women met the criteria for IT (Chi-square 53.04; $p < 0.01$). Using reports of the behavior of the partner found that 6.5% of men and 7.1% were classified as IT (Chi-square 2.52, $p = 0.29$). Thus, the percent of female ITs was somewhat greater than the percent of male ITs but not significantly different, regardless of whether the data used was self-report or partner-report data, or data provided by men or women. The similar percent of male and female ITs is consistent with most other studies that investigated gender differences in coercive control and IT Bates, Graham-Kevan, and Archer (2014); Bates and Graham-Kevan (2016); Bogaerts, Van der Veen, and Van der Knaap (2011); Felson and Outlaw (2007); Ehrensaft and Vivian (1999); Graham-Kevan and Archer (2004); Hines and Douglas (2010a); Jouriles, (Jouriles & McDonald); Jasinski and Morgan (2014); Langhinrichsen-Rohling, McCullars, and Misra (2012); Laroche (2005); Oswald and Russell (2006); Stets (1991a); Stets (1991b); Stets and Pirog-Good (1990); Straus (2008).

7.2. Dyadic types of intimate terrorism

As explained in the *Method* section, to identify the DCTs of IT for this sample, we cross-tabulated whether the male partner was an IT by the same variable for the female partner. This found that 18% were *Male-Only* IT, 32% *Female-Only* IT, and 50% *Both* IT. It is important to keep in mind that these are not percentages of the study sample, but percentages of the subsample of couples in which there was an IT. The half of violent couples *Both* IT is consistent with percentages found by many previous studies of physical violence, and with DCTs for several types of abusive behavior, such as sexual coercion and psychological aggression and injury (Straus, 2015, Table 4). It is important to keep in mind that, as just pointed out, 50% *both* IT is far from 50% of the

relationships involving IT because it is 50% of the 7% of relationships in which IT was present.

An important issue is whether the percentage of couples in each DCT is influenced by whether the male or female partner provides the information. To investigate this, DCTs were recalculated separately using data provided by male students and by female students. Fig. 1 shows that men and women agreed on the prevalence of the *Both* DCT. But for the *Male-Only* and *Female-Only*, men and women reported a lower percentage in the DCT for their own gender as the sole perpetrator. Despite these differences in the sole-perpetrator categories, the data in Fig. 1 provided by both men and women contradicted the core assertion of Johnson: that IT is perpetrated almost exclusively by men (Johnson, 2006), as do the many studies cited in the previous paragraph.

7.3. Evaluation of criteria to identify intimate terrorism

The results just presented on similar percent of male and female may seem to be inconsistent with evidence on the higher level of severe violence and injury inflicted by men. Men perpetrate about two thirds of PV in which the violence is lethal and do it more brutally than when women murder a partner (Wolfgang, 1958). Men also perpetrate about two thirds of the non-lethal injuries of partners (Straus, 2011, Table 2). Of course, there are also horrifying cases of women who terrorize and torture male partners (Hines & Douglas, 2009, 2010b; Migliaccio, 2002) but they are a small fraction of cases of men who engaged in such behavior so vividly documented by Browne (1987). The discrepancy between the much higher rates of extreme partner violence by men than women and the similar rates of IT led us to examine Johnson's criteria for identifying intimate terrorism. Two important problems were identified.

One problem can be termed *conceptual misspecification*. Misspecification, because the concept of "terrorist" implies severe assaults, and injury, and perhaps also a chronic pattern of such behavior. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines terrorism as the use of violent acts to frighten people. However, fear and fright are not among the criteria used by Johnson to identify ITs. Johnson states "...the frequency and severity of the violence has no bearing whatsoever on whether the violence is classified as intimate terrorism" (Johnson, 2008).

A second problem is *inadequate operationalization* of coercive control. The difference between IT and SCV hinges on whether coercion is used to achieve and maintain generalized subordination and subjugation, as compared to coercion to get the partner to do or to stop a specific behavior. However, the measures used by Johnson and

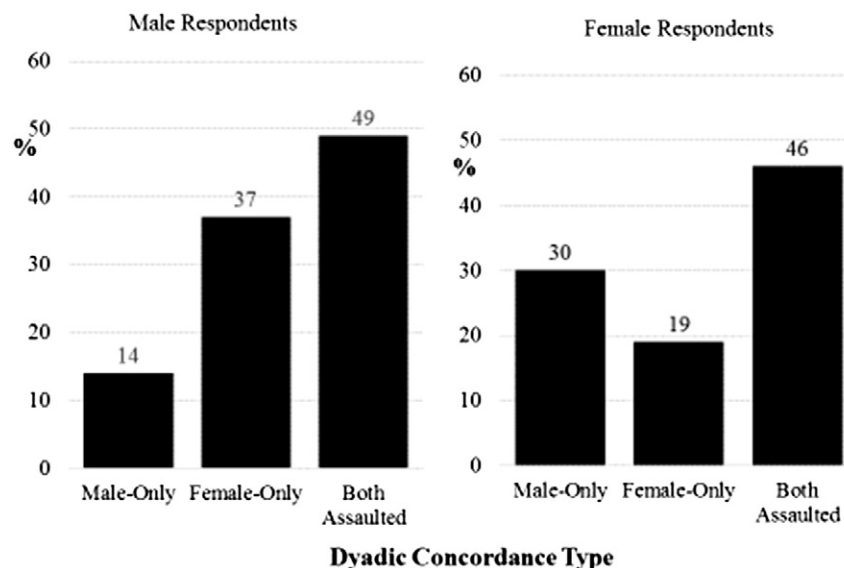


Fig. 1. Concordance between partners in intimate terrorism by university students.

others (including the current study) do distinguish generalized coercion from situational coercion. They measure acts which can plausibly be assumed to have the intent of achieving generalized control, but do not measure whether that was achieved. Example items include: “Limits your contact with family and friends.” “Is jealous or possessive.” “Calls you names or puts you down in front of others?” Even assuming that the intent is generalized domination, these items do not indicate if that had been achieved.

8. Discussion

8.1. Summary of key empirical results

This study of a large sample of student couples using Johnson's criteria for IT found that when there was IT in the relationship, for 18% of the couples only the male partner was an IT, for 32% of the couples, only the female partner was IT, and for 50% of the couples, both partner were IT. These results are consistent with other studies cited and contradict the idea that IT is almost entirely perpetrated by men. Analysis of the criteria to identify IT suggested that part of the explanation may be that Johnson's criteria are not adequate to identify the level of violence implied by the label “terrorist.”

8.2. Limitations

8.2.1. Convenience sample of students

An analysis of data for each nation in the study based on the student samples with estimates based on representative samples and census data found them to be consistently correlated. For example, the mean score for students in each nation on a measure of Male-Dominance in dating relationships was found to have a correlation of 0.69 with the Gender Inequality Index developed by the United Nations (Gaye, Klugman, Kovacevic, Twigg, & Zambrano, 2010). It was suggested that this correspondence results from a “national context effect” which affects all sectors of the population (Straus, 2009).

More generally, a large number of studies have found parallel results from testing hypotheses using student samples with results from general population samples. This includes reviews of more than 70 studies on the percent in each DCT (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Selwyn et al., 2012; Michel-Smith & Straus, 2014; Straus, 2013), one of which used data provided by a sample of mothers of children age 7 to 10 (Jouriles & McDonald, 2015).

8.2.2. Limited to physical assault

The focus on physical assault ignores other forms of abuse that partners can inflict on each other. For example, psychological aggression is much more frequent than physical aggression and is even more strongly related to mental health problems (O'Leary & Cohen, 2007; Salis, Salwen, & O'Leary, 2014; Straus & Sweet, 1992). Research examining DCTs for a variety of modes of abuse is needed, and is beginning to become available. One example a study of the relation of concordance in sexual coercion to relationship distress (Straus & Kemmerer, 2015).

8.3. Implications for measuring intimate terrorism

8.3.1. Threshold for physical violence

The criterion specified by Johnson is *any* assault. This is not consistent with the image evoked by “terrorism.” Possible ways to make it more consistent are to raise the threshold for violence to be higher than *any* instance of assault, for example to include severe assault, chronicity of assault, and injury, and especially fear. Fear is a key element of terrorism, and there are established measures, such as O'Leary, Foran, and Cohen (2013). Another possibility to examine is the extent of poly-victimization (Sabina & Straus, 2008).

8.3.2. Measure achieved control

Almost all the items in the coercive control measures, used by Johnson, measure what is presumed to be an *intent* to control and subjugate the partner, not the degree to which this has been achieved. Items measuring the extent to which a partner complied or felt subjugated are needed to identify cases in which one partner has achieved generalized control and subjugation of the other partner.

8.3.3. Gender inclusive

Finally, the IT versus SCV distinction is part of typology which includes categories for Violent Resistance and Mutual Violent Control, but does not include a category for women who are ITs when the male partner is not IT.

8.4. Implications for the gender symmetry controversy

The IT-SCV typology is often believed to help resolve the 35 year controversy over whether the percent of women who assault a partner is similar to the percent of men because it acknowledges the similar rate of physical assault among couples in what Johnson asserts are 90% of violent couples – the SCV type. Those who believe that PV is fundamentally a problem of male dominance and male aggression can perceive this as resolving the dispute because the IT category is *assumed* to be almost entirely men, and because it is identified as the problem for which remediation is most needed. The results of this study and other studies cited which have found similar rates of IT by women and men suggest it does not resolve the controversy. What can? I have long suggested that nothing will, and perhaps most important, that both perspectives are necessary because each brings a needed focus to research and intervention (Straus, 1999).

8.5. Theoretical implications

8.5.1. Patriarchy/male-dominance

The high percentage in the *Both* IT type, is consistent with most studies of gender differences in coercive control and IT cited previously. It is consistent with the growing number of scholars calling for the patriarchy or gender theory to be placed within a theoretical framework in which male dominance is only one of many causes (Dutton, 2006; Felson, 2006; Felson & Outlaw, 2007; Hamel & Nicholls, 2007; Straus, 2008; Whitaker & Lutzker, 2009).

8.5.2. The *Both* IT category

This high percent *Both* IT found by this study, and found for assault as well as other forms of abuse by many studies (Straus, 2015), indicates a need to explain why such a large percent of cases are in the *Both* DCT. When the abuse is physical assault, an important part of the explanation is self-defense. However, a review of 18 empirical studies suggests that self-defense is not the typical explanation (Straus, 2012). Nine of the studies asked women whether they acted in self-defense. The percentages ranged from 5% to 47% with a median of 19%. Which partner was the first to hit was investigated by eleven of the studies in this review. The percent of women who hit first ranged from 25% to 61%, with a median of 46%, i.e., about half the women in violent relationships were the first to hit.

Hitting in self-defense can be thought of as part of a more general human tendency to reciprocate which tends to apply to both positive and negative behaviors. In addition to an inherent tendency to reciprocity, there is often cultural norms requiring “If hit, hit back.” In the current sample, 30% of the men and 22% of the women reported that “My father or mother told me to hit back if someone hit me or insulted me”. The tendency to reciprocate is probably also part of the reason psychological attacks tend to escalate into physical attacks (Winstok & Straus, 2011).

Another likely contributor to the bi-directionality of IT is assortative mating. Unfortunately, assortative mating applies to anti-social

as well as pro-social characteristics. Research on marital and dating partners, has found that aggressive and antisocial persons tend to form relationships with others with similar behavior patterns (Kim & Capaldi, 2004; Krueger, Moffitt, Caspi, Bleske, & Silva, 1998; Miller et al., 2011).

Community influences are probably also part of the explanation for the predominance of the both DCT, not only in IT, but also other modes of partner abuse (Straus, 2015). Partners tend to be from the same geographic community. If it is a community high in risk factors for violence, such as stressful life circumstances, low education, and high violence, both will have been exposed to these risk factors. Similarly, the co-residence of partners means both are exposed to whatever risk factors for violence are present in their community.

8.6. Prevention and treatment implications

There is wide agreement on the importance of taking the diverse nature of family violence into consideration when designing research and interventions, including identifying when the violence involves coercive control. The distinction between IT and SCV was a move in that direction, but more in accepting the idea of diversity in PV than implementing it. We know of no published reports describing prevention or treatment programs which implement the IT-SCV distinction.

An obstacle to taking the diverse nature of partner abuse into account in treatment is lack of practical methods of doing so. *Dyadic Concordance Types* can be a step in that direction. DCTs permit a screening for this crucial aspect of diversity by asking about assault and coercive control by each partner. If, necessary, a preliminary screen can be accomplished by asking the presenting partner two questions one on assault perpetration and one on coercive control, provided the presenting partner is asked about both the partner's behavior and their own. A therapist then almost immediately knows whether the assaults and the coercive control are *Male-Only*, *Female-Only*, or *Both* and can take that into account in formulating a treatment plan.

We suggest that identifying the DCTs for whatever mode of abuse is being treated, is a crucial diagnostic first step, but it is only a first step. The crucial next step is to take the DCTs of each case into account when developing a treatment plan, and even more crucial, implementing it. Implementing a dyadic approach to treatment does not necessarily require couple therapy because the problems needing remediation have been found to often include pre-existing episodic heavy drinking, low self-control, borderline personality, etc. of either partner. A dyadic approach does require addressing the problems and needs of both partners, not just those of the presenting offender, as is the case with current "batterer intervention programs."

Although there is evidence suggesting the need for dyadic treatment based on dyadic diagnosis (Straus, 2014), the effectiveness of such a dyadic-diagnosis informed treatment must be empirically demonstrated, first in exploratory programs, and ultimately in a random assignment experiment. Such an experiment would identify the DCT of each case at intake and assessment of the help needed by both partners. A random half would be provided with a dyadic intervention that included help for the social and psychological problems of both partners, not just the presenting offender. A plausible hypothesis is that the dyadic treatment group will not only have more success in avoiding subsequent partner abuse, but also result in relationships that are more satisfying and more able to meet the needs of both partners and those of their children.

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