

## Psychological Effects of Partner Abuse Against Men: A Neglected Research Area

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*This article discusses the research on abuse against men in intimate relationships with a primary focus on the effects of this abuse. We begin by discussing the incidence of physical aggression against men, then address methodological and conceptual issues associated with the incidence data. We next review studies assessing the effects of aggression against men and discuss ways in which this research can be furthered and improved. Finally, we discuss why men would choose to stay in these relationships and consider the scant research on emotional abuse against men.*

In the early 1970s, the abuse of wives by their husbands finally gained the recognition and attention it deserved in the academic community and the public. This recognition was long overdue, as wives tend to be victimized by their husbands at an alarming rate. For example, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, in 1994, 900,000 women were the victims of assault by an intimate partner ([Craven, 1997](#)). Nationally representative surveys show an even bleaker picture: In their 1975 survey of American families, [Straus and Gelles \(1986\)](#) found that, among wives reporting violence from their husbands in the previous year, 12.1% said that they had been the victim of some sort of violence and 38% reported that they had been the victim of severe violence. This rate of severe violence toward wives equaled 2.1 million wives nationwide. In their 1985 resurvey, Straus and Gelles found an apparent decline in the incidence of wife beating. Specifically, there was a 27% decrease in the rate of severe violence by husbands, which translated into 432,000 fewer cases of severe violence against wives. Although the severe assault of 1.6 million wives is still not acceptable, Straus and Gelles argued that this apparent decline may have been the result of the increased attention that wife beating had received and the consequences that had been instituted for men who assault their intimate partners.

The effects of abuse against women are significant. For instance, many women who are the victims of either minor or severe assaults by their intimate partners are physically injured. Specifically, in Straus's 1985 nationally representative survey, 7.3% of the women who reported being severely assaulted by their spouses needed to seek medical attention ([Stets & Straus, 1990](#)). Similarly, [Makepeace \(1986\)](#) found in a study of dating couples that 7.7% of women sustained a moderate or severe physical injury as a result of the violence they experienced. [Cascardi, Langhinrichsen, and Vivian \(1992\)](#) found even graver statistics: 15% of the women who reported experiencing minor spousal abuse and 11% of the women who reported experiencing severe spousal abuse reported suffering broken bones, broken teeth, or injury to a sensory organ.

In addition to these physical consequences, most abused women also suffer psychological consequences as well. For example, abused women have been shown to experience fear and anxiety responses ([Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd, & Sebastian, 1991](#)); depression ([Cascardi et al., 1992](#); [Stets & Straus, 1990](#)); stress and psychosomatic symptoms ([Stets & Straus, 1990](#));

posttraumatic stress symptoms such as intrusive memories, psychogenic amnesia, sleep problems, eating problems, hypervigilance to danger cues, exaggerated startle responses, irritability or anger responses, and psychosomatic symptoms (e.g., gastrointestinal problems, headaches, and chronic illnesses; [Walker, 1993](#)); alcohol and drug abuse ([Kilpatrick, 1990](#)); and low self-esteem and suicidal, self-destructive, self-mutilating, and assaultive behaviors ([Carmen, Ricker, & Mills, 1984](#)).

Although there is a substantial research literature addressing abuse against women and its consequences, the flip side of this issue, physical abuse against men and its consequences, is a less researched area. Many of the previously cited studies provided some statistics on the rate of wives physically abusing their husbands, but there has been almost no research on the consequences of this type of abuse. In this article, we will first review data on the prevalence of violence directed at husbands by wives. Although the exact rate of this abuse is open to debate, we argue that there are enough male victims of violence by their wives to warrant attention to the consequences of that violence. Next, we discuss the scant research that has been done on the consequences of this type of abuse and argue that more rigorous research is needed. Finally, we discuss two areas that have received even less attention: (a) why men stay in abusive relationships and (b) emotional abuse against men and its effects.

Although at times throughout this article we consider the relative effects of abuse against men versus abuse against women, we are not arguing that the two forms of abuse can be equated. Previous investigations considering violence by women as well as against women are included in our review because they are among the few studies actually providing data on the incidence and effects of abuse against men. We do not doubt that in a society in which men are economically, socially, and politically dominant over women, women typically suffer more physically and psychologically from male-female violence than men do from female-male violence. Although it seems as if the debate until now has been about who the greater victims are, men or women, the research has made it clear that, on average, women are the more devastated victims of spousal abuse because of the relative size of men and women and because of the above-mentioned social structure. However, evidence that women are injured more seriously and more often does not mean that the male victims of intimate violence should be ignored. It is our view that because many men are being victimized in their intimate relationships, the effects of this victimization are worth exploring.

### **Incidence of Physical Abuse Toward Men**

Incidence reports of women abusing their husbands have appeared since the study of family violence began in the early to mid-1970s. For example, in [Gelles's \(1974\)](#) groundbreaking study on domestic violence, he found that, in his clinical sample, "the eruption of conjugal violence occurs with equal frequency among both husbands and wives" (p. 77). He also presented the following statements of women who abuse their husbands:

He would just yell and yell — not really yelling, just talk loudly. And I couldn't say anything because he kept talking. So I'd swing. (p. 76)

I spent all that time by myself and sometimes the kids would get on my nerves ... so when I got mad I hit him. (p. 76)

I probably had no reason to get angry with him ... but it was such a bore. I was trying to wake him up, you know. He was such a rotten lover anyway. So I'd yell at him and bit him to stir him up. (p. 151)

Since [Gelles's \(1974\)](#) study, information regarding rates of violence by wives has come from several different sources. First, crime statistics from the U.S. Department of Justice showed that in 1994, 167,000 men were the victims of assault by an intimate partner ([Craven, 1997](#)). Crime surveys, however, are assumed to provide low estimates of intimate violence against both men and women because many people are unwilling to label the physical violence they receive at the hands of an intimate partner a crime. This reluctance may be even more pronounced for men than for women because men are supposed to be the physically dominant and aggressive partner; consequently, admitting to being victimized by a woman and labeling it a crime may be viewed as emasculating ([Steinmetz, 1977](#)).

A second source of data on violence by wives is the National Violence Against Women Survey, in which 8,000 men and 8,000 women were randomly telephoned and interviewed about their experiences with violent victimization. This survey found that 7% of the men reported being physically assaulted by a current or former wife or cohabitating partner over the course of their lifetime. In addition, 0.8% of the men reported being physically assaulted in the previous year ([Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000](#)). This survey also may have underestimated the amount of violence against men because the respondents were told that they were being interviewed about "personal safety" issues, and many men may not have viewed the violence they received at the hands of their wives or girlfriends as a threat to personal safety.

A final source of data on violence against men is studies using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; [Straus & Gelles, 1986](#)), the most well known of which are the National Family Violence Surveys conducted in 1975 and 1985. Using data from the National Family Violence Survey of 1975, [Straus \(1980\)](#) found that 11.6% of the husbands reported having experienced some sort of violence from their wives within the previous year. Moreover, 4.6% (2.6 million nationwide) of husbands reported having been the victim of severe violence by their wives. *Severe violence* was defined as behaviors, such as kicking, punching, beating, or using a knife or gun, that have a high probability of causing physical injury. Wives indicated that they had committed a median of three violent acts per year and tended to throw things at or kick their husbands as their "favorite" form of abuse. Straus stated that he decided to present these findings on husband beating to show that violence cannot be understood in terms of a single factor, such as sexism, aggression, lack of self-control, or mental illnesses, as previously asserted.

In 1985, Straus and Gelles replicated their 1975 National Family Violence Survey. Of 6,002 couples surveyed, 12.4% of the husbands reported some level of physical assault by their wives in the previous year. In addition, 4.8% (again 2.6 million nationwide) reported being the victim of severe violence. These numbers are particularly striking because, as mentioned previously, there was an apparent decline in the rate of wife beating from the previous national survey, but the rates of violence against husbands remained approximately the same (Straus & Gelles, 1985).

Straus's reports ([Straus, 1980](#); [Straus & Gelles, 1988](#)) of this high rate of violence by wives have been challenged on methodological and conceptual bases. The methodological attacks on the

results of the National Family Violence Surveys have focused primarily on the CTS, which was used in both studies. Criticisms of the CTS include the following:

1. Respondents are asked about psychologically and physically aggressive acts in the context of conflicts; violence against women, critics argue, often occurs outside of any conflict between partners (e.g., [Marshall & Rose, 1988](#)).
2. Respondents are not asked about the effects of those aggressive acts, but, because of differences in size and strength, it is likely that women are more seriously injured from aggressive behaviors such as hitting and punching than men are from those same acts (e.g., [Ferraro & Johnson, 1983](#); [Marshall, 1992](#)).
3. Respondents are not asked about their motivations for aggressive acts. This omission is important because women's aggression may be only in self-defense (e.g., [Pleck, Pleck, Grossman, & Bart, 1977- 1978](#)).

Supporters (e.g., [Dobash & Dobash, 1988](#)) of the first major criticism of the CTS — that it requests frequencies of specific nonaggressive and aggressive behaviors within the context of conflict — point out that much of male violence against women is arbitrary, unpredictable, and unrelated to any identifiable conflict. Although it is clearly correct that not all violence occurs in the context of an immediate conflict, there is no evidence that either women or men will refrain from reporting a slap, punch, or beating merely because it seemed to come out of nowhere. It seems likely that the introduction to the CTS, which emphasizes that all couples have conflicts and may use a variety of conflict tactics, makes it easier rather than more difficult for respondents to discuss the extent to which they have experienced each of the aggressive behaviors presented.

The second major methodological attack on the CTS emphasizes that superficially comparable acts, such as hitting and punching, can have much more injurious consequences when perpetrated by a man against a woman than when perpetrated by a woman against a man. The critics are correct on this issue: On average, women are injured more frequently and more severely at the hands of their husbands than men are at the hands of their wives (e.g., [Cascardi et al., 1992](#); [Makepeace, 1986](#); [Stets & Straus, 1990](#)). However, the fact that men can be injured at the hands of their significant others and that many times they are injured severely, should not be ignored.

Finally, in addressing the third point raised by critics, that violence by wives is mostly in self-defense, [Straus and Gelles \(1988\)](#) noted that the “meaning and consequences of that violence is easily misunderstood. ... The same act is likely to be very different in the amount of pain or injury inflicted. ... [Many] of the assaults by women against their husbands are acts of retaliation or self-defense” (p. 19). Data from several studies on violence by battered women support this proposition (e.g., [Saunders, 1986](#); [Walker, 2000](#)).

Although we acknowledge that most *battered* women use violence in self-defense, the bulk of the research on motivations for violence in intimate relationships has shown that self-defense is not the motivation for women's violence in the majority of cases. For instance, [Follingstad et al. \(1991\)](#) found that the major reasons reported by college women for using physical force against their partners were not attempts at self-defense but rather efforts to show anger, to retaliate for

emotional hurt, to express feelings that they had difficulty communicating verbally, and to gain control over the other person. Jealousy ([Makepeace, 1981](#)), anger, and confusion ([Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982](#); [Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983](#)) have also been cited as frequent motivations for violence among male and female college students. Although women cited self-defense as a motivation significantly more often than men did, it was never the most cited motivation for violence by either sex. In addition, other researchers have found that dominance and control are primary motives for female violence ([Felson & Messner, 2000](#); [Rouse, 1990](#)), whereas still others have found that a high need for affiliation, when combined with life stress and low activity inhibition, is a strong motive for female violence ([Mason & Blankenship, 1987](#)).

In addition to the research on motives, other data from the 1985 National Family Violence Survey also fail to provide support for the interpretation that women's violence is mostly in self-defense. Specifically, [Straus and Gelles \(1988\)](#) asked respondents who hit whom first and found that in 42%-45% of cases, the wife hit first (the differences in the percentages is a function of who reported, the wife or the husband; these two numbers are not significantly different from each other), whereas in 44%-53% of cases, the husband hit first. Although critics have argued that many times abused women will initiate their own violence to control the timing and place of violence by men, it appears that not all violence by wives can be considered simply a form of self-defense or retaliation.

Proponents of the usefulness of the CTS (e.g., Straus and his colleagues) generally acknowledge that although, like all instruments, it is imperfect, there is good support for its reliability and validity as a measure of aggression in close relationships. Moreover, despite the criticisms, it continues to be the most widely used measure of aggression in family and other intimate relationships and continues to provide powerful data concerning violence by and against women. Although data on motivations for and effects of violence are crucial to processes of understanding, education, and intervention, [Straus \(1990\)](#) has made a powerful argument that motivations and effects are variables that should be studied as part of investigations of violence but should not be incorporated into the operational definition of violence. Even [Walker \(1990\)](#), a strong critic of the CTS, has argued that when collecting data on violence and abuse, "it is important to be precise in describing the actual acts that occur" (p. 23), which is precisely what the CTS was constructed to do.

There has been some recognition by researchers who do not use the CTS that husband abuse may indeed be a problem that can be characterized as a serious social concern. For instance, while treating the clients of a male batterers' program, [Stacey, Hazlewood, and Shupe \(1994\)](#) found that many of their cases were actually cases of mutual abuse. They found that many couples tended to be mutually abusive and that the roles of victim and perpetrator were constantly shifting. In addition, when studying responses of police officers in their study, Stacey et al. reported that the police would arrest the man as the batterer if the woman were the abuser because there was no counseling program for violent women available. The police hoped that, by arresting the man, they could get the couple into a program. The assumption was that if they arrested the wife, no counseling would be mandated and the husband would generally drop the charges. However, because the man was arrested, he had to sign a statement that labeled him as the violent perpetrator. This lack of help for women who abuse their husbands is quite common.

Indeed, one woman in Stacey et al.'s sample remarked on the recovery of her battering husband by stating, "[Now] he tries to understand my side of the argument. He talks to me rather than hits me. I still hit him, however. I would like to enroll in a class in anger management, but the [local] shelter for battered women does not help women with this problem" (p. 63).

Several studies have indicated that violence by women may be increasing. For example, in a longitudinal study of 272 newlywed couples, [O'Leary et al. \(1989\)](#) found the following: Before marriage, 44% of the women reported that they used physical aggression against their partners; at 18 months after marriage, 36% of the wives reported that they used aggression against their spouses; and at 30 months after marriage, 32% of the wives reported that they used aggression against their spouses. This rate is 3-4 times that found in the 1975 and 1985 National Family Violence Surveys. In addition, at each of these three time periods, the women were more likely to be stably aggressive, whereas the husbands were more likely to be stably nonaggressive. O'Leary et al. also found that although 41%-57% of the time any violence experienced was mutual, the differences between wife-only violence and husband-only violence were noteworthy. Specifically, in 8%-13% of the violent marriages, the husband was the sole perpetrator of the abuse, whereas in 16%-26% of the violent marriages, the wife was the sole perpetrator.

Similarly, in the longitudinal National Youth Survey of 1,725 young adults, [Morse \(1995\)](#) found that across four time periods, 27.9%-48.0% of the female partners perpetrated violence against their male partners. In addition, 13.8%-22.4% of the women perpetrated severe violence. These rates for minor physical violence are 2-4 times greater than the rate found in the National Family Violence Surveys, and the rates for severe physical violence are 3-5 times greater. When analyzing the dynamics of the relationships, Morse found that (a) between 48.5% and 58.5% of the violent couples were mutually violent; (b) men were the sole perpetrators in 9.9%-13.9% of the couples; and (c) women were the sole perpetrators in 29.7%-37.7% of the couples. These results are similar to those of [O'Leary et al.'s \(1989\)](#) study. Finally, [Morse \(1995\)](#) asked the respondents in one of the assessment periods to report who used violence in the last most serious argument they had with their spouse. Men were 2 times more likely than females to say that only their partner used violence, and women were 3 times more likely than men to say that only they used violence.

Finally, in a study that looked specifically at physical abuse against male college students, 40% of those males surveyed reported that they were the recipient of physical aggression from their girlfriends, and 29% reported that they received serious physical abuse at the hands of their girlfriends ([Simonelli & Ingram, 1998](#)). Again, these rates are 3-6 times greater than those found in the 1975 and 1985 National Family Violence Surveys.

These studies show that female-perpetrated violence does indeed exist in relationships and cannot always be dismissed as merely self-defense. Although women are more likely than men to use violence in self-defense, many women acknowledge that they have other motives for violence against their partners. In addition, whereas self-defense may be a major motivation for many women in mutually violent relationships, violence in the 16%-38% of violent couples characterized by female-only violence is obviously not a matter of self-defense. Many women report themselves to be capable of perpetrating violence against their partners, and the ramifications of this violence are worth exploring.

## Effects of Physical Abuse Against Men

### Physical Injuries and Death

The majority of studies that have assessed the victimization of men in marriages have compared these men to abused women. Researchers mostly have attempted to ascertain whether abused women experience more physical injuries than abused men. However, in this article we consider only the rate of physical injuries among men. Overall, as previously stated, the studies have clearly shown that abused women are at higher risk for physical injury than abused men. It should be emphasized, however, that these studies have also shown that abused men are at risk for physical injury as well.

For instance, [Cascardi et al. \(1992\)](#) found that 2% of the men who reported experiencing minor or severe spousal abuse reported suffering broken bones, broken teeth, or injury to a sensory organ. Similarly, [Makepeace \(1986\)](#) found that 2.2% of the males in his sample of 2,338 students reported sustaining a moderate or severe physical injury as a result of the dating violence they experienced. Finally, in an analysis of the results from the 1985 National Family Violence Survey, [Stets and Straus \(1990\)](#) found that 1% of the men who reported being severely assaulted needed medical attention.

The results of these studies are logical, considering the relative size of the average man compared with the average woman. Obviously, men can inflict more harm with their fists than women can, and they are more able to restrain an abusive partner than women are. Some researchers, however, have pointed out that sometimes women may even the score by throwing things that could hurt their partners (e.g., dishes, boiling water, or a frying pan) or by brandishing a weapon ([Langley & Levy, 1977](#)). Perhaps this explanation is a reason why [Morse \(1995\)](#) and [Makepeace \(1986\)](#), compared with the injury rates in the previously mentioned studies, found even higher rates of injury among men. Specifically, depending on the time period, 10.4%-19.6% of the abused men in Morse's study sustained some type of injury at the hands of their wives ([Morse, 1995](#)). Similarly, [Makepeace \(1986\)](#) found that 17.9% of the abused men in his sample sustained a mild or moderate injury. These rates of injury for abused men are noteworthy because they confirm that men can be injured by women.

In addition, although sources vary in reported frequencies of different forms of violence, it is clear that the effects of women's violence against men, like those of men's violence against women, can be lethal. For example, using data from the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI's) *Uniform Crime Reports, Supplemental Homicide Report* (1994) to analyze homicides between marital partners in the United States from 1976 through 1985, [Mercy and Saltzman \(1989\)](#) found that "husbands and wives were nearly equal in the risk of spouse homicide victimization" (p. 597). Whereas Mercy and Saltzman focused on marital partners, [Browne and Williams \(1993\)](#) analyzed a broader set of relationships and noted that FBI *Uniform Crime Reports, Supplemental Homicide Report* data for 1980-1984 indicated that "whereas only 12 percent of male homicide victims were killed by a female partner, over one half — 52 percent — of all women murder victims were killed by male partners" (p. 81).

More recently the 1994 *Uniform Crime Reports, Supplemental Homicide Report* revealed that, in 1994 for homicides in which the victim-offender relationship was known, 31% (1,394) of female victims over the age of 12 and 4% (669) of male victims over the age of 12 were killed by an intimate. Although most of these statistics indicate that women are more likely to be killed by an intimate than men are, it cannot be denied that a substantial number of men are being murdered by their female partners — and, although some of these murders are undoubtedly in self-defense, there is no evidence that all of them are (e.g., [Mann, 1988](#)).

## **Psychological Effects**

Because men tend to be at low risk of physical injury at the hands of their female partners, the most fruitful avenues to pursue in research exploring the effects of abuse against men are the psychological effects. The bulk of the research that has been done on the psychological effects of physical abuse against men has compared abused men to abused women on various psychological outcomes. These studies certainly have been valuable in highlighting the potential consequences of this abuse on men.

In a study comparing the psychological effects of physical abuse on men and women, [Follingstad et al. \(1991\)](#) found that, following physical abuse, approximately 75% of the abused men reported experiencing anger; nearly 40% reported being emotionally hurt; nearly 35% reported experiencing sadness or depression; nearly 30% reported seeking revenge; nearly 23% reported feeling the need to protect themselves; approximately 15% reported feeling shame or fear; and approximately 10% felt unloved or helpless. In addition, in her longitudinal study, [Morse \(1995\)](#) found that 9.5% of the younger males and 13.5% of the older males reported experiencing fear in their violent relationships.

[Stets and Straus \(1990\)](#) researched the extent and severity of depression, stress, and psychosomatic symptoms manifested in both male and female abuse victims. For both abused men and abused women, the higher the level of violence experienced, the more severe the depression, stress, and psychosomatic symptoms. In addition to comparing abused men to abused women, Stets and Straus also used a more appropriate comparison group, nonabused men. They found that abused men were significantly more likely to experience psychosomatic symptoms, stress, and depression than nonabused men — a result similar to that of [Cascardi et al. \(1992\)](#), who found that abused husbands had significantly greater levels of depression than nonabused husbands.

In a study that specifically addressed the issue of abuse against men, [Simonelli and Ingram \(1998\)](#) assessed psychological distress and depression among college men experiencing emotional or physical abuse in their present or most recent relationships. They found that 90% of their sample reported experiencing emotional abuse, 40% reported experiencing physical abuse, and 29% reported experiencing severe physical abuse. Psychological distress and depression were significantly greater in men who reported being the recipient of either physical or emotional abuse than in men reporting no abuse. In addition, being physically abused predicted 37% of the variance in depression, whereas being emotionally abused predicted 14%-33% of the variance in depression (depending on the emotional abuse scale used). Finally, being emotionally abused

predicted 15%-16% of the variance in psychological distress. Thus, abused men appear to be at substantial risk for experiencing depression and psychological distress.

In sum, the results of these studies show that abused men are at risk for emotional hurt, fear, helplessness, anger, revenge seeking, sadness, shame and humiliation, depression, stress, psychological distress, and psychosomatic symptoms. However, these studies have a number of major weaknesses. First, the researchers focused primarily on internalizing symptoms, which women experience at two times the rate of men in the population as a whole; they did not examine more externalizing symptoms, such as alcoholism, that are more characteristic of a man's reaction to stressful events (e.g., [Comer, 1992](#)). Second, they also did not assess other symptoms that have been found to be prevalent in women who are abused, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD; [Walker, 1993](#)), and suicidal, self-destructive, self-mutilating, and assaultive behaviors ([Carmen et al., 1984](#)). Third, because the focus of many of these studies was the relative victimization of abused females to abused males, they did not specifically address the psychological consequences of physical abuse against men. To gain a clearer picture of the consequences of abuse toward men, researchers need to study both the externalizing and internalizing behaviors of abused men compared with those of nonabused men. Fourth, these studies were all cross-sectional studies. It therefore is not possible to conclude that the physical abuse men experienced from their partners caused these symptoms. It could also be the case that men who experience these symptoms are more likely to be victimized by physical abuse or that a third variable is the cause of both the symptoms and the abuse. Without a longitudinal study, it is not possible to draw any conclusions regarding causation. Finally, these studies did not separate men who only experienced abuse from those who both experienced and perpetrated abuse.

This last point is an important one to stress. None of the studies in the current literature seem to consider that the dynamics of a mutually abusive relationship may be very different from the dynamics of a relationship in which the man is the sole victim. When couples are involved in a mutually abusive relationship, the line between victim and perpetrator is unclear and constantly shifting. The causes and consequences of violence in these mutually combative relationships may be quite different from the causes and consequences of violence in relationships in which men refuse to fight back because of societal sanctions against hitting a woman, because of the potential damage they know that they could inflict ([Steinmetz, 1977-1978](#)), or because they are unable to ([Langley & Levy, 1977](#)).

For example, [Langley and Levy \(1977\)](#) reported an account of a police officer who called a crisis line to report that his wife beat him. As Langley and Levy relayed:

He ... said: "My woman drinks, and every Friday night when I come home, she just starts pounding on me ..." He said he'd been severely beaten up by her several times and that he was big enough to fight back but that he didn't want to beat her, and didn't know where to turn to solve his problem. He was very emotional. (pp. 189-190)

[Langley and Levy \(1977\)](#) also related the story of an elderly man who was married to a woman 31 years his junior who was severely battered by his wife for 14 years. He displayed several bruises and scars. One time his wife shredded his ear with her teeth, and she injured one of his eyes so badly that the doctor thought he might lose it. These men who are the sole victims of

violence in their intimate relationships should be assessed separately from men involved in mutually abusive relationships because the psychological ramifications could be quite different.

### **Why Do They Stay?**

Extensive research has been done to investigate why abused women would choose to stay with their abuser. Explanations range from social and economic constraints against leaving to being the victim of learned helplessness (i.e., a syndrome in which the woman feels she is helpless to effect any change in her environment). Other explanations focus on the woman's psychological dependence on her abuser such that whenever she moves toward separation from him she experiences distress at the prospect of losing this important relationship ([Dutton & Painter, 1981](#)). Finally, the gravest concern for a battered woman is that if she leaves the relationship, her abuser will come after her and most likely kill her. Indeed, statistics show that the most dangerous time for a woman in an abusive relationship is the time immediately after she leaves her abuser ([Craven, 1997](#)).

Several qualitative studies have attempted to explain why men would choose to stay in relationships that are abusive, especially when, compared with abused women, many of these men have the physical and economic resources to leave ([Pagelow, 1984](#)). One explanation that has been forwarded relates to marriage. When a couple marries, they merge their economic resources and living situations and make vows to each other of commitment and love. This commitment to marriage has been found to be one reason men are reluctant to leave abusive situations ([Lupri, 1990](#)). These men may genuinely love their wives, and their wives are apologetic after an incident ([Pagelow, 1984](#)). Also, disclosure of the abuse by their wives would be extremely embarrassing for these abused men, especially because this type of abuse is the opposite of society's stereotypes, in which the man should be dominant and the woman submissive ([Flynn, 1990](#)). These men may be unwilling to endure the snickers, innuendos, and sarcasm that they would probably have to face if they filed a formal complaint ([Langley & Levy, 1977](#)).

In addition, abused men, like abused women, may become used to a certain standard of living. If they were to leave their wives, they most likely would have to move out of their homes, support their (ex)wives, and pay for their own living expenses as well ([Steinmetz, 1977-1978](#)). In addition to being committed to the marriage, many men refuse to leave an abusive situation because of their children. Because abuse of husbands is relatively unrecognized, it is difficult for abused men to use this defense in court to obtain custody of their children (assuming that they are willing to admit they are abused). In addition, mothers usually are awarded custody. As one abused man related,

She ran off with another man, but after a short time returned home. I was told, principally by lawyers, that I must take her back. For if I pressed a divorce action, she would be seen as a poor, aggrieved, helpless woman, and she would literally clean me out. She could get eighty-five percent of my income and have our five children entrusted in her care. ([Langley & Levy, 1977](#), p. 191)

Therefore, many abused men refuse to leave for fear of leaving their children with abusive women. They believe that if they stay, they can at least protect the children if necessary ([Gregorash, 1993](#); [Steinmetz, 1977-1978](#)). Finally, many men refuse to leave their abusive wives for the same reason that women refuse to leave their abusive husbands: They are psychologically dependent on them and excuse the abuse as being a result of certain circumstances, such as alcohol intoxication ([Pagelow, 1984](#)).

Although these qualitative studies are valuable in identifying issues related to male victimization, they lack the kind of quantitative information that would be more generalizable. Although they provide a useful starting point for understanding why abused men may choose to stay with their abusers, they should be supplemented with more objective, quantitative data from representative samples.

### **Emotional Abuse**

The scant research that has been done on the dynamics of emotionally abusive relationships has tended to concentrate on battered women. However, even though many battered women have identified the degradation, humiliation, and fear they feel at the hands of their abusers as the most devastating aspect of their abuse ([Walker, 1984](#)), few researchers have looked at the specific effects of emotional abuse on either women or men, probably in part because of difficulties in defining emotional abuse ([Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause & Polek, 1990](#)).

### **Definitional Issues**

Several researchers have attempted to define the concept of emotional abuse. For example, on the basis of the work of [Walker, 1984](#) and their own experience, [Follingstad et al. \(1990\)](#) described six components of emotional abuse: (a) verbal attacks (ridicule, verbal harassment, name calling); (b) isolation (social or financial); (c) jealousy/possessiveness (even with family, friends, and pets); (d) verbal threats of harm, abuse, or torture; (e) threats to divorce, abandon, or have an affair; and (f) damage to or destruction of personal property. The abused women in their study said that isolation and jealousy/possessiveness were the most frequent types of emotional abuse, whereas verbal attacks and verbal threats of harm, abuse, and torture were the worst types of emotional abuse.

One of the most consistent findings in the research on emotional abuse is that it often coexists with physical abuse (e.g., [Molidor, 1995](#); [Simonelli & Ingram, 1998](#); [Walker, 1984](#)). In addition, in a longitudinal study of community couples, [Murphy and O'Leary \(1989\)](#) found that emotional abuse by either partner was one of the strongest predictors for the first instance of physical abuse by the other partner. Even though emotional abuse tends to coexist with or predate physical abuse, emotional abuse can occur without physical abuse, and its effects are still devastating to those victimized by it. Many emotionally abused women, for instance, have stated that the emotional abuse they experienced was worse than the physical abuse. Indeed, [Follingstad et al. \(1990\)](#) found that 72% of their sample of 234 battered women reported that the emotional abuse they received from their partners was worse than the physical abuse. These women experienced ridicule and threats to leave, felt that the men were likely to carry out their threats, and felt that

the abuse was justified. In addition, most of these abused women experienced more emotional abuse than physical abuse.

### **Incidence of Emotional Abuse**

The Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory (PMI), a widely used inventory of emotional abuse that was originally developed by [Tolman \(1989\)](#) for use with married women, was altered by [Kasian and Painter \(1992\)](#) to assess emotional abuse in men and dating couples as well. The PMI covers positive behaviors in relationships as well as behaviors intended to control a partner (emotionally and socially) or diminish a partner's self-esteem. In addition, it assesses jealousy, verbal abuse, and withdrawal.

In a study of emotional abuse in 1,625 college-aged participants, [Kasian and Painter \(1992\)](#) found that males reported experiencing high levels of emotional abuse in their relationships. Specifically, approximately 20% reported isolating and emotionally controlling behaviors by their partners; approximately 15% reported the diminishment of their self-esteem by their partners; approximately 20% reported experiencing jealousy behaviors from their partners; approximately 10% reported experiencing verbal abuse from their partners; and approximately 10% reported experiencing withdrawal behaviors from their partners.

Similarly, using the PMI, [Molidor \(1995\)](#) found in a survey of 736 high school students that males reported experiencing an average of 23.41 emotionally abusive acts from their partners in the course of their relationship. In addition, two studies showed that college men also experience high rates of emotional abuse. Specifically, [Simonelli and Ingram \(1998\)](#) found that, as measured by the PMI, 90% of their male sample reported experiencing emotional abuse. The types of emotional abuse experienced most frequently were jealousy (77%), withdrawal (77%), diminishment of self-esteem (63%), verbal abuse (60%), and social and emotional control (49%). Finally, [Hines and Malley-Morrison \(2001\)](#) found that 82% of their college male sample reported being the recipients of emotional abuse. Such data indicate that men are experiencing high rates of emotional abuse in their relationships. Consequently, it is important to ascertain the effects of this type of abuse on them.

### **Effects of Emotional Abuse**

The effects of physical abuse have been studied much more systematically than the effects of emotional abuse. Although the bulk of this research has been done with women, one case study of an emotionally abused man exists in the literature. [Smith and Loring \(1994\)](#) related the case of a man who was emotionally abused both as a child by his mother and as an adult by his wife. This man stated that, during his marriage, his wife called him ugly, refused to walk next to him in public because she was ashamed to be seen with him, threatened to kill or castrate him while he was sleeping, taught their son to call him "dummy" and "wimp," found the negative in everything he did (including hugging her and buying her flowers), and accused him of having affairs. He felt frightened for his life, blamed himself for everything, and lost 31 pounds. Why did he stay with this woman? He said, "There were times that she bought me gifts and said she loved me; I occasionally felt a little kindness, and I thought maybe she would change. It was enough to keep me clinging to her" (p. 2). This statement contains an important insight, as the

researchers believed that this man suffered from traumatic bonding, in which the abuser alternates abusive behavior with kindness, creating a bond that involves intermittent positive reinforcement. This type of bond is difficult to break.

Although the [Smith and Loring \(1994\)](#) case study is an important contribution to the literature, it does not reveal much about the effects of emotional abuse against men in general. Only two studies have provided some indication of what the possible psychological effects of emotional abuse against men in general are. [Simonelli and Ingram \(1998\)](#) showed that up to 90% of men have been the victims of emotional abuse at least once in the previous year. They then showed the relative contributions of both physical and emotional abuse to the variance in depression and psychological distress and found that experiencing emotional abuse accounted for 14%-33% of the variance in depression and 15%-16% of the variance in psychological distress.

In addition, [Hines and Malley-Morrison \(2001\)](#) assessed the incidence of PTSD and alcoholism symptoms in 116 college men involved in dating relationships. PTSD symptoms were assessed because they are common in women who are emotionally abused, and alcohol use was assessed because, as previously mentioned, men tend to respond to stressful events with externalizing behaviors such as alcohol use. Hines and Malley-Morrison found that the more emotional abuse these men experienced in their relationships, the higher their symptom counts for PTSD and alcoholism. Both of these relationships were statistically significant.

These three studies ([Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001](#); [Simonelli & Ingram, 1998](#); [Smith & Loring, 1994](#)) show that men suffer psychologically from the emotional abuse they experience at the hands of their intimate partners. However, this research is only a first step in identifying the effects of emotional abuse against men. Other possible outcomes and a wider age range of men need to be studied. Also, to properly assess the causal relationship between abuse and adverse psychological outcomes in emotionally abused men, it is necessary to follow men longitudinally.

## **Conclusion**

Research has shown that men can be victims of physical abuse in their intimate relationships with women. According to several studies, including at least two nationally representative studies, women physically abuse men at a substantial rate. This physical abuse takes the form of both minor and severe abuse, and it cannot always be dismissed as self-defense.

Research on the psychosocial problems resulting from abuse is what is most lacking in the literature on abused men. Researchers know that abused men tend to suffer injuries, depression, and psychosomatic symptoms in response to their victimization. However, for the most part, studies that have considered the experiences of abused men have done so in comparison with abused women, even though abused women are not always an appropriate comparison group. To study the psychosocial adjustment of abused men, they should be compared with nonabused men. In addition, most studies have tended to look at injuries and internalizing symptoms. Although these obviously are important areas to assess, that most domestic violence incidents do not result in injury (especially in men) and that men tend to display externalizing, not internalizing, symptoms in response to stressful life events must be considered. Therefore, the extent of externalizing symptoms such as alcohol and substance abuse in abused men should be

assessed. From reviewing several studies on abused women, we learned that possible PTSD-like reactions, self-mutilating behaviors and assaultive behaviors should be considered. In addition, because the few studies that have addressed this issue are cross-sectional, longitudinal studies are needed so that causation can be inferred.

In addition, quantitative research regarding why men stay with their abusive partners is needed. Although qualitative studies have shown that abused men stay with their wives because they may suffer from traumatic bonding, seek to protect their children, wish to maintain their current economic standard of living, are embarrassed by their situation or are committed to their marriages, quantitative research is needed so that these conclusions can be further validated and generalized.

Finally, research is sorely needed in the area of emotional abuse against men. The research so far has shown that it occurs in a large percentage of relationships, and one qualitative and two quantitative studies have demonstrated that emotionally abused men can experience depression, psychological distress, alcoholism, PTSD, weight loss, fear, and self-blame. However, more research in this area is desperately needed.

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