

Male victims of domestic abuse. A hidden problem? How are male victims of domestic abuse presented in academic research?

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Since Steinmetz (1978) first referred to 'battered husbands', the potential for family violence to be directed towards men has been a topic of debate between violence theorists. This paper discusses a review of research about male victims of domestic abuse summarising current understandings.

To put rates of abuse in context, the UK Office of National Statistics found 15% of men and 26% of women had experienced some form of domestic abuse since age 16. 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6–7 men suffer domestic abuse during their lifetime. (Flatley, 2017).

The issue of male victims periodically appears in the media (Channel 4, 1999; BBC News, 2017; Christodoulou, 2011; ITV News, 2016). Recently Jordan Worth became the first person to be convicted of coercive or controlling behaviour in an intimate relationship, UK law since 2015. (Home Office and Bradley, 2015) 'Worth... banned her partner from their bed, decided what clothes he could wear, isolated him from friends and family and even took over his Facebook account' (9News, para. 3) Such cases have shock value that becomes news for a few days, but do not appear to raise awareness in the long term. A narrative synthesis of the quantitative scientific literature was used to grasp the breadth and form of the phenomenon.

Rather than see only isolated men, via personal stories in the media, the intention was to ask: What is the scale of the issue? What is the global reach? What form does the abuse take? Is it different to that experienced by women?

From a counselling perspective it is important to acknowledge that male clients may have domestic abuse as part of their history. By gaining a greater understanding of this issue counsellors can better support male clients. Studies such as this one can contribute to the knowledge of the issue, and increase the visibility of relevant services, and support men to take opportunities to have their experiences heard and worked through within the safety of the counselling room.

Methods

As part of this research five databases were consulted, with a total of 517 papers returned. These were as follows:

	Number returned
● Embase (1980–)	13
● Maternity and Infant Care (01/01/1978–)	6
● Medline (01/01/1946–)	132
● PsychInfo (01/01/1806–)	219
● CINAHL (01/01/1960–)	147

These databases encompass a range of counselling, psychology, nursing and allied health publications, and include both scientific journals and professional literature. Searches were finalised on 24th April 2018. From these 517 papers 65 were then removed as duplicates, leaving 452 for further consideration.

Through three stages of selection (titles, abstracts, and full text) this was reduced to a final selection of 29 papers. (See PRISMA chart) All stages, and the papers removed at each stage, were fully documented. Due to space constraints it is not possible to document all stages of this process here. A version of the full project can be found at <https://valleytherapist.wordpress.com/publications/> and complete information about what papers were removed at each stage is there.

Overall study characteristics

22 studies were conducted in the US or Canada, 6 in Europe, and 1 in the UK. Sample sizes varied from 20 couples (N=40 participants. Bélanger, Mathieu, Dugal and Courchesne, 2015) to a population sample of N=10,106,000 (Hoff, 2012). Ages varied from 15 through the adult lifespan, but the usual range was adults aged 18 or older only. The focus of the studies varied, including for example specific age groups, mental or physical impacts, the use of services, and type of abuse (physical, psychological, sexual, legal-administrative). Participant types also varied, including students, the general population, and self-identified victims. For these reasons the papers have been split into thematic groups.

These groups, and the papers in them, were–

1. Students and young people: Começanha et al. (2017), Próspero and Kim (2009), Próspero (2007), Próspero and Fawson (2010), Ackerman (2012), Harned (2001), Fortin et al. (2012).

2. Population samples: Alvarez-del Arco et al. (2013), Costa *et al* (2015), Drumm, Popescu and Riggs (2009), Hoff (2012), Jose, Olino and O'Leary (2012), Lövestad and Krantz (2012), Murty et al. (2003), Renner *et al* (2015).

3. Self-identified victims: Ansara and Hindlin (2011), Drijber, Reijnders and Ceelen (2013), Berger, Douglas and Hines (2016), Cho and Wilke (2012), Galovski et al, (2011), Gaman et al, (2017), Machado, Hines and Matos (2016), Tsui (2014), Bélanger et al, (2015).

4. Comparing help-seeking and general population: Hines and Douglas (2011) and (2015).

5. Samples recruited in a medical centre: Hester et al. (2017), Houry et al. (2008), Mechem *et al* (1999).

Discussion

Within each of these five groups of papers similarities and differences can be seen. In Group 1 (population samples of students and young people) all authors found high levels of psychological abuse, with 70–80% incidence rates. Abuse was frequently bi-directional, and all papers that covered it found mental health impacts of abuse for men and women. Both papers in group 4 also researched mental health impacts. However these papers are by the same authors, so author bias may not be balanced out, and this is a limitation of this group.

Rates of abuse were higher for younger than older respondents, and the paper in group 2 that focused on younger couples, Jose et al. (2012), supported this too. '[T]he prevalence of physical aggression is higher than in a sample that would be representative of the full range of the population.' (Jose et al., 2012, p.204).

Within the population samples studied in group 2, conservative church attendees (Drumm et al., 2009) and farm workers (Murty et al., 2003) had an increased likelihood of being abused in comparison to other groups. The potential impact of aspects of life such as these would be an interesting aspect to investigate in future research, but is not something that has been particularly considered to date. Is there something about the culture or politics in these groups that makes abuse more prevalent, and if so what other groups do these factors also occur

in?

Amongst self-identified victims of group 3 (as with the other groups) psychological abuse was the most frequent type of abuse reported. In this group similarities exist across papers around the impact of social stigma, and the usefulness or otherwise of services. Bi-directional violence is again reported in some cases, but is often not included within the research by the authors.

The studies in group 5, conducted amongst attendees at medical centres, present wide differences in findings, with no particular similarities in results. Bi-directional abuse was again evident however. Similarities can be drawn to papers in other groups though in terms of types of abuse reported and younger respondents having a higher prevalence of abuse.

Several themes emerge across the groups and can be imagined as a jigsaw around the issue of male victims of domestic abuse. Fourteen papers specifically discuss the mental and physical impacts of domestic abuse, and find in most cases the impact on men and women to be comparable. For example PTSD presentation was researched by Galovski et al. (2011) who state it is 'remarkably similar' (Galovski et al., 2011, p. 799) between genders, and Próspero and Fawson (2010) discuss sexual coercion as damaging to both sexes.

'A man saying "no" to sexual intercourse may be perceived as socially unacceptable and therefore elicit mental health symptoms... Outreach efforts by primary prevention workers and media should take place to resocialize and teach men and women that it is socially acceptable for men to refuse sex from a woman, even his intimate partner. This would follow the present day efforts for men and boys to stop sexual coercion when a woman or girl says "no": (Próspero and Fawson, 2010, pp101, 102.)

Several papers in this synthesis found bi-directional abuse to be common within abusive relationships, (Bélanger et al., 2015; Começanha et al., 2017; Fortin et al., 2012; Houry et al., 2008; Lövestad and Krantz, 2012; Próspero and Kim, 2009; Renner et al., 2015) and in some cases, such as the Costa et al. (2015) study of six European countries, it was the

dominant pattern. All eight of these studies included the experiences of both men and women, three of them using couples, meaning the relationship was investigated from both perspectives. A range of validated questionnaires was used which support the robustness of these findings, however further research with larger groups would be useful as the largest here was N=3496 in Costa et al. (2015).


The issue of support services, and especially the unhelpfulness of official services like police and courts, is a theme that runs through several papers (Drijber et al., 2013; Machado et al., 2016; Tsui, 2014; Berger et al., 2016). '[T]hose who did report the abuse [to police] reported not being taken seriously or were accused themselves' (Drijber et al., 2013, 176). Tsui found the rating by male victims for the helpfulness of the police was the lowest of any source, at 1.68 on a five point scale (Tsui, 2014, p. 127), and Machado et al. comment '[n] one of the men found the police, justice system, or social/victim support services to be very helpful' (Machado et al., 2016, 259).

A thread that runs through several papers is the belief that masculinity norms and social stigma block men from being able to access help and admit they are being abused. (Machado et al., 2016; Cho and Wilke, 2010; Drijber et al., 2013). They argue internal and external barriers lead to male victims having less visibility, and some researchers argue there may be underreporting here (Gaman et al., 2017, p.344). Limitations on the size of the project meant this theme could not be fully explored in a wider context, but it is something that will be returned to. For example it would be interesting to look at research that looked at the perception of abuse in a scenario where male and female roles were reversed for different readers. Several papers were found considering versions of this idea, but they were removed to focus on research with data from male victims rather than wider societal perceptions and attitudes.

In several cases across these papers the sample sizes are small, and authors (Hines and Douglas, 2015; Alvarez-del Arco et al., 2013; Bélanger et al.,

2015; Cho and Wilke, 2010; Machado et al., 2016) note this as a limitation. Their findings need to be conducted with larger groups to see if they are replicated. Renner et al. (2015) also note their results were with a 98% white, rural population, and the specificity of their sample may be a limitation. While the range of research here does point to patterns emerging, and some reinforcement of findings, it would be interesting to see more studies to add to this data set.

Conclusion

In summary, when the review questions – the scope, range and types of domestic abuse aimed at men – are returned to, this project can begin to answer them. Abuse is seen across the whole geographical region considered here. The scope of the issue includes higher incidences of abuse amongst younger people. Findings about the scope of the abuse also suggest men and women are affected in similar ways mentally and physically, and that PTSD can impact men just as it does women. As counsellors it is also important to be aware of personal stereotypes that may impact the perception of male clients, and to be open to men as potential victims, not just aggressors. This awareness matters, as between 1 in 6 and 1 in 7 men experience domestic abuse during their lifetime, making it likely it will at some point be an issue brought into the therapeutic space. 



Biography

I graduated from the University of Leeds in 2018, and now run a private practice and volunteer for TalkThru working with pregnancy loss and birth trauma. My interest in male victims of domestic violence continues to inform my practice, and I am also active with MenCASA gender inclusive counselling for domestic abuse.

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