

Lectio praecursoria

Criminological Perspectives into Intimate Partner Violence: Uncovering Commonalities between Partner Violence and General Crime

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Violence between current or former partners—that is, what I refer to as intimate partner violence—is commonly portrayed as something distinct from other types of violence. Media stories on individuals who have killed their partners quite often tend to emphasize the normality of these individuals. These stories reproduce the idea that, unlike other homicides, the killing of an intimate

partner is likely to occur out of the blue with hardly any visible risk factors of violence present prior to the incident.¹

Correspondingly, in public education efforts, the statement that violence occurring between partners does not depend upon background characteristics such as the socioeconomic status of the people involved in it is often implicitly or explicitly presented.² The

¹ See, for instance, the following news articles: *Il-talehti*, 20.12.2022, *Lastaan Ullanlinnan taposta epäillyllä psykiatrilla käyttänyt äiti osasi heti yhdistää kylmävät tapahtumat* [A mother whose child visited the psychiatrist suspected of the killing in Ullanlinna could immediately connect the chilling events]; *Ilta-Sanomat*, 2.5.2023, *Tuore parisuhde päättyi julmalla tavalla Hotelli Katinkullassa – tuttavat järkyttyivät 28-vuotiaan naisen kuolemasta: ”Shokkitilanne”* [A recent romantic relationship ended in a brutal manner at Hotel Katinkulta – acquaintances were shocked by the death of the 28-year-old woman: “A shock situation.”]; *MTV Uutiset*, 26.9.2020, *Surmattu perheenäiti Sini, 25, oli kuollessaan raskaana – rauhallisena tunnetun aviomiehen teko tuli sokkina ystäville: ”On vaikea uskoa, että Sini on poissa ja syyppää on hänen miehensä”* [The murdered mother

Sini, 25, was pregnant at the time of her death – the act of her husband, known for his calm demeanor, came as a shock to friends: “It’s hard to believe that Sini is gone, and the blame is on her husband.”]

² For example: “Kuka tahansa voi joutua perhe- ja lähisuhdeväkivallan kohteeksi: se ei ole kiinni sukupuolesta, iästä, koulutuksesta, varallisuudesta tai asuinpaikasta. [Anyone can become a victim of family and intimate partner violence: it is not dependent on gender, age, education, wealth, or place of residence]” Ensi- ja turvakotien liitto, <https://ensijaturvakotienliitto.fi/tukea-ammattilaiselle/perhe-ja-lahisuhdevakivalta/tunnista-vakivalta/>, accessed on 20.5.2023.

same discourse is rather rarely employed when discussing other types of crimes we know are unevenly distributed across the population. Overall, public discourses and anecdotes on violence between partners tend to portray it as an issue different from other forms of violence in terms of the people involved in and the pathways leading to it.

IS VIOLENCE BETWEEN PARTNERS TRULY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER TYPES OF CRIMES?

The separation of partner violence from general crime not only concerns lay theories and common-sense explanations, but science as well. Violence between partners has conventionally been studied outside mainstream criminology (Walby et al., 2014). Typically, it has been studied in the context of societal-level gender inequality and male oppression against women rather than within the framework of crime. It could be argued that this distinction between intimate partner violence and other types of crimes has also served some political and ideological purposes specifically related to promoting feminist ideas.

Conceptualizing violence between partners as violence against women and as a form of structural misogyny—instead of, for instance, as an individual antisocial propensity—serves as a powerful way of underscoring the importance of feminist pursuits within society. Clearly, framing partner violence as a gender issue is based on good intentions.

However, the question remains whether the extensive focus on gender and partner violence as male dominance over women has led many to overlook some key characteristics of violence between partners, particularly those relating to similarities between intimate partner violence and general crime. Therefore, we should ask: Is violence between partners truly that different from other types of crimes?

Regardless of how that question is answered, it is self-evident that intimate partner violence is not a minor societal issue and should not be treated as such. In Finland, multiple individuals lose their lives as a result of such violence each year (Suonpää et al., 2023). Yet, lethal violence represents the tip of the iceberg. A great number of people are physically injured at the hands of their loved ones and an even a greater number of people suffer psychological damage resulting from such violence (Siltala et al., 2022).

I argue that in order to successfully prevent and reduce any form of violence in our society, we should aim to rigorously study it as a real-life phenomenon. My research builds on the notion that understanding the nature and causes of intimate partner violence should stem from empirical, scientific research, not from anecdotes or theoretical ponderings without empirical support.

CRIMINOLOGICAL FACTS AND INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Criminology is the empirical study of various types of behaviors and social phenomena that can be in a broad sense defined as crimes. Few things can be considered fact within the field of criminology, but I now take the risk of presenting five such “facts”.

First, it is a criminological fact that men generally commit more crimes than women, specifically violent crimes, regardless of the gender of the victim (e.g., Archer, 2004; Felson, 2002). Determining that gender plays some role in intimate partner violence would not necessarily point towards differences between partner violence and other types of crimes, but would, in fact, identify similarities between these phenomena.

Second, it is a criminological fact that crime is not evenly distributed in the population, but is systematically associated with certain

social correlates, some of which may be even more relevant predictors of crime than gender (e.g., Aaltonen et al., 2012; Baxendale et al., 2012). Assessing whether similar correlates are associated with intimate partner violence and other types of crimes may prove essential to understanding the similarities and differences between these phenomena.

Third, it is a criminological fact that those who commit crime quite seldomly only commit one type of crime (e.g., Piquero, 2000). Demonstrating that perpetrators of partner violence also tend to engage in other types of criminal behaviors would challenge the notion of violence between partners as conceptually and etiologically unrelated to general crime.

Fourth, it is a criminological fact that offenders and victims are quite often the same people (e.g., Berg & Shreck, 2022). The overlap between victim and offender populations is well-established for multiple types of crimes. As indicated by the general criminological research, studying the nature of this overlap in the context of intimate partner violence may shed light on the mechanisms producing violence.

Lastly, it is a criminological fact that crime is a complex phenomenon unlikely to be adequately understood by any single unifactorial explanatory framework. Scholars promoting certain “general” theories within criminology might disagree with this fact, but I stand my ground. If intimate partner violence is anything like general crime, understanding its nature and causes is likely to benefit from acknowledging the plurality of factors impacting it.

Overall, it could be argued that as long as we considered interpersonal violence between any individuals a crime, criminology remains the most relevant context for studying intimate partner violence. Indeed, a well-known

criminologist—and, a somewhat controversial scholar—Richard B. Felson, has argued that, “*violence is violence, regardless of the target. To understand it, we should rely on theories of violence and aggression, not feminism*” (Felson, 2002, p. 5). Notably, however, this argument is not necessarily true. More importantly, the argument is falsifiable. That is, it can be empirically assessed by testing whether criminological facts and notions apply to the context of intimate partner violence. Along these lines, my research aims to empirically assess the relevance of the criminological framework in studying intimate partner violence.

If, at this point, you remain unconvinced, let me take a brief sidestep into the philosophy of science to explain why this perspective is valid from a general scientific point of view. Karl Popper, probably the most well-known philosopher of science given that even I know of him, argued that, in order for a theory to be scientific, it should propose falsifiable hypotheses (Popper, 1958). In fact, the problem with some of the most prominent theoretical frameworks within partner violence research is that they do not quite satisfy this specific requirement. For instance, adequately verifying whether violence between partners is actually caused by structural-level patriarchy is, to my understanding, empirically exceptionally difficult. The advantage of my research is that we actually can test whether there are similarities and associations between partner violence and general crimes.

In addition to falsifiability, another philosophical concept that I bring to the table is the principle of parsimony—the so-called Occam’s razor—which states that “*Entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity*” (Baker, 2016). In simple language and in the context of my research, this means that, if intimate partner violence represents a subcate-

gory of general crime, relying on specific explanatory frameworks in attempts to explain it is not well-justified.

WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM APPLYING CRIMINOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES TO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE?

Now that I have attempted to address the relevance of my research and demonstrated my expertise in philosophy, I next present my actual research findings from the four substudies in my dissertation. In these studies, I apply a criminological perspective to intimate partner violence in order to assess the commonalities between partner violence and general crime. While the studies explored multiple, more specific research questions employing a variety of statistical methods using both survey- and register-based data on intimate partner violence victimization and offending, the primary findings can be summarized in three main points. So, what can we learn from my research?

First, my research points towards considerable similarities between intimate partner violence and general crime. Importantly, the findings collectively demonstrate that various known criminological facts also apply to violence between partners. This emerged on various levels. Most importantly, my findings revealed common risk factors in partner violence and other types of violence and indicated the significance of known criminogenic risk factors, such as socioeconomic status, in understanding various patterns of intimate partner violence.

I also found that well-established criminological facts concerning the relevance of versatile criminal offenses and the victim-offender overlap also apply to intimate partner violence. Thus, in general, my findings do not support the idea that intimate partner violence is an entirely “unique” type of crime or

qualitatively distinct from general criminality. Rather, these phenomena have much in common.

Second, my primary findings relate to the interconnectedness of various forms of criminal victimization and offending among individuals involved in intimate partner violence. Not only is intimate partner violence similar to other types of crimes, but these phenomena also overlap. Fundamentally, I found that victims of intimate partner violence also face an elevated risk of being victims of other types of violence and crimes as well. Moreover, those who commit intimate partner violence also tend to commit other types of crimes. Specifically, a significant share of those who commit violence towards partners are generalist offenders who also break the law in other contexts.

In addition, my findings highlight the importance of acknowledging the associations between victimization and offending among individuals involved in partner violence. Victims and offenders of intimate partner violence are not two entirely separate groups of individuals, as some explanatory frameworks implicitly or explicitly assume. My research provides evidence indicating that the experiences of intimate partner violence offending and victimization might even be causally associated, a finding perhaps unsurprising to lay people, but unexpected to some criminologists.

Collectively, my research reveals that due to diverse associations between these phenomena, experiences of different types of victimization and offenses should not be studied in isolation from one another. Refusing to acknowledge the overlaps between intimate partner violence and other types of crimes, in addition to the overlap between victimization and offending, is likely to lead to an inadequate understanding of these phenomena.

Third, my main findings concern the complexity of intimate partner violence as a multifaceted social phenomenon. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that not all partner violence is the same and multiple factors associate with different patterns of intimate partner violence. Indeed, findings from one of the substudies demonstrated that three distinct subtypes of intimate partner violence appeared in the victim survey data. Similarly, another substudy suggested that different subtypes of offenders could be identified based on the level of specialization in intimate partner violence.

Overall, my findings indicate that intimate partner violence is unlikely to be adequately understood through any simplistic and single-factor explanatory framework. Indeed, my research provides evidence for the notion that, while some forms of intimate partner violence may indeed fit well under the umbrella of general crime, understanding some subtypes of violence between partners is likely to benefit from more contextually based explanations.

THE ROLE OF GENDER AND A NOTE TO POLICYMAKERS

Given the above, it is also important to address the implications of my findings in terms of the role of gender in partner violence. Importantly, all of the data sets used in this research included both male- and female-perpetrated violence, rendering the assessment of the significance of gender possible in the first place. My primary findings concerning gender and intimate partner violence were twofold. On the one hand, all of the substudies revealed that gender played a considerable role in the patterns of intimate partner violence I examined. Most importantly, women were more likely to be victims and men perpetrators of such violence regardless of the data source.

On the other hand, the findings overall did not indicate an analytical primacy of gender over other characteristics of violence—nor did they propose that female- and male-experienced violence represented two entirely different phenomena. The take-home message, then, is that gender is important, but not necessarily the most important variable when attempting to understand intimate partner violence. While the complexities related to the relationship between gender and violence should be addressed in any research on violence between partners, using gender as the only analytical lens in such inquiries is unjustified.

Before providing my final conclusions, I direct my gaze towards policymakers. The distinction between intimate partner violence and other types of crimes in society concerns not only media anecdotes and scientific research, but also crime prevention efforts where intimate partner violence is most commonly targeted in isolation from other types of crimes and vice versa. My research suggests that single-focused strategies or isolated interventions may not effectively tackle the underlying causes and dynamics of any violence. Not recognizing the interconnections between intimate partner violence and crime more generally, in addition to the diversity of violence, may lead to a limited impact from any strategy. Clearly, rigorous research on the effectiveness of current practices, followed by evidence-based prevention efforts, is necessary to successfully reduce violence in our society.

FINAL REMARKS

Finally, I would like to address the implications of this research in a broader scientific context. Criminology as a field of science has frequently been criticized for its exclusive focus on male criminality and male-to-male vi-

olence, and for pushing forms of crime involving non-males to the margins of the field (Daly & Chesney-Lind, 1988; Walby et al., 2014). This critique remains valid and justified, particularly in light of the results reported here, which challenge the distinction between general crime and intimate partner violence most typically also involving females. I believe that criminology could quite easily tackle this critique by revising and widening its perspectives on crime.

On the other hand, my findings also challenge the prominent view of intimate partner violence, which suggests that gender should remain the primary analytical lens via which to understand violence between partners (Reed et al., 2010). Consequently, I acknowledge that some elements of my findings might be hard for some to swallow. Cognitive dissonance may arise from the conflict between what is perceived as social justice and a morally just perspective into partner violence alongside what the empirical evidence indicates is true. In fact, my own interest in this topic stemmed from such feelings, from realizing that I might have been wrong. Thus, in closing, I emphasize that the meaning of science is not to be emotionally convenient, but to seek the truth. In order to truly understand why violence occurs in our society, that must be the only aim.

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