Female Aggression

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Preface

We met several years ago at an interdisciplinary conference where we were both presenting different papers on the same topic: the sexual abuse of children by women. Our post-conference contacts evolved into a discussion about child murder, then a journal article on infanticide, followed by more discussions and more articles. At one point, we decided that we wanted to address the widespread problem of aggressive and violent behaviour by women in a more comprehensive way. We noted that, over the last twenty years, a variety of texts has been published, each addressing a single topic of female aggression, including:

- *When Women Kill* (Mann, 1996)
- *Sexually Aggressive Women* (Anderson & Struckman-Johnson, 1998)
- *Woman-to-Woman Sexual Violence* (Girshick, 2002b)
- *Aggression, Antisocial Behavior and Violence among Girls* (Putallaz & Bierman, 2004)
- *Gender Inclusive Treatment of Intimate Partner Violence* (Hamel, 2005)
- *Why Mothers Kill* (McKee, 2006)
- *Female Sexual Offenders* (Gannon & Cortoni, 2010)

Each of these texts was a landmark publication in its own right, calling attention to the problems and consequences of specific arenas of aggression by women. What was missing, however, was a comprehensive review and analysis of aggression by women in multiple areas, a single volume that looked at all aspects of murder, rape and abuse by women.

We also agreed that the topic of female aggression has earned its own place within the literature. For a multitude of reasons, female behaviour, including aggressive behaviour, is consistently reported within the context

of direct comparison with male behaviour. Historically, reports of female aggression have been described only in comparison to male aggression (i.e., women are less aggressive than men). By setting women's aggression only within the context of male behaviour, the implication is that aggression is typical of men and unusual for women. This trivializes the problem of women's aggression and the experiences of victims of that aggression. We view women's aggression as an important societal problem and a topic worthy of study on its own, rather than simply a footnote to male aggression.

It is our hope that this text will become a useful reference for behavioural scientists interested in the topic of human aggression, one that stimulates interdisciplinary research on the topic. We also hope that professionals within law enforcement, policy development and psychology will also find this volume useful as they move beyond simple awareness of women's aggression as an unrecognized public health issue and towards changes to address and prevent these behaviours.

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Theories, Research and Misconceptions about Female Aggression

Read the newspapers or watch TV and we view a world that is clearly violent. In many places, news agencies report on conflict, war, ethnic cleansing and torture. Every week it seems that there is another young man stabbed to death on the streets of a major city, and sportsmen or celebrities are in court accused of monstrous sexual assaults. What the majority of these news stories have in common is that they are about men and male aggression. There is an unvoiced popular belief that this violence is male, or originated by men. If this seems a strange thing to point out, try to imagine how these events would be reported if the perpetrators were female.

Introduction

Aggression is defined as intra-species behaviour carried out with the intent to cause pain or harm (Tremblay, Hartup, & Archer, 2005). This definition covers the forms of aggression identified as aggression between nations or states, adopted by the Unite Nations General Assembly in 1974, but it also applies to the interpersonal violence that affects our everyday lives. The behaviour can be physical, mental or verbal, and should not be confused with assertiveness or anger. Aggression can also be classified as hostile (usually regarded as having an emotional or retaliatory context) or instrumental (predatory or goal oriented). Dependent on the theoretical position, a definition of aggression can vary from the above. For example,

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Buss and Perry (1992) suggest that we can separate out the acts of verbal and physical aggression and define them as the motor components of behaviour that involve harm to others. Hostile aggression is regarded as spontaneous, motivated by anger, in comparison to instrumental aggression, which is deliberate, planned and targeted towards the attainment of a goal (Ramirez, 2009). This dichotomous definition is questioned by some, as the reactive emotional goal may be to inflict pain on another, but is a handy description that distinguishes some types of behaviour or motivations from others. This dichotomy is commonly encountered when describing aggression in women. According to Barratt et al. (1999), aggression can be classified in terms of the cause of the motivation, i.e., it can be premeditated (proactive), impulsive (reactive) or medically (biologically) based. The common element in all the arguments is that they are behaviourally based, but some also include the terms 'anger' and 'hostility' interchangeably with 'aggression', which appear to be emotional (internal) in nature and hence not directly observable. This complexity is also reflected in the different forms of measurement for aggression (Suris et al., 2004).

This lack of definitional clarity is possibly due to the range of theoretical positions underlying all of the research in aggression. This range can be loosely defined as psychological theories (from psychodynamic positions to cognitive and behavioural models to social origins of behaviour, and societal factors inherent in aggression) and biological perspectives (including evolutionary theories, genetic causes, chemical contributions and neurological outcomes). This chapter introduces these positions and relates them to the study of female aggression.

Aggression and Women

It is accepted that men are more likely to express their aggression in ways that are physically violent, and that women will behave in indirect ways, being less capable of exerting the same physical force. This somewhat simplistic viewpoint is reflected in every major theoretical perspective on aggression; comparative, evolutionary, biological, psychological and social models all reiterate that men/males are the aggressors. Women are viewed as only using aggression in passive, submissive or emotional ways. This book sets out to examine this position and to explore theories and research

about female aggression, its motives and outcomes, possibly exposing a few myths on the way.

Physical aggression among and by girls and women has become more prevalent. This is evident in women's sports, media aimed at or including women, and the criminal and juvenile justice systems (e.g., UK Home Office, 2012; US Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014). Psychological theories provide a basis for examining a society that values aggression and the consequences of that (erroneous) placement of worth. If society that accepts male aggression and violence becomes accepting of female aggression, then rising rates of female-perpetrated violence must be the consequence. Conversely, women's violence and aggression may be leaving the domestic sphere, where it has been relatively invisible, and entering the public arena.

Female aggression is a fact of life, but one that is only lately being addressed by mainstream social and behavioural sciences. There is a wealth of animal research that examines female aggression, but applying these findings to human behaviour or emotional response is difficult at best. Studies on rodents, or red-fronted lemurs, or even our genetically closest primates concentrate on female aggression as the result of events that concern animals, such as competition for mates or food, or the protection of offspring. Such research must also be careful to curtail any interpretation that could open itself to criticism of anthropomorphizing behaviour. When we do find aggression studies on humans, it is almost as if the peculiar lens of comparative psychology must be applied here, as researchers seem happy to compare female behaviour to that exhibited in the male, rather than as behaviour in its own right. The literature on the topic seems to view aggression by women or girls as either a pale copy of male aggression, or specific to certain situations, such as alcohol abuse or domestic violence. There is also a tacit assumption that female aggression has the same motivations and form of expression as male aggression. There is little acknowledgement in the literature that viewing female aggression as poorly expressed imitative behaviour of male aggression minimizes and trivializes women's behaviour, anger, perspectives and viewpoints. In 2005, Richardson reviewed thirty years of research on gender differences in aggressive behaviour. She found that the assumption that females were not aggressive could not be supported, as studies did, in effect, demonstrate the opposite. Women in laboratory studies did respond to provocation and could not be described as passive. The conclusion is that the major point of

difference is not in the form of aggression, but the relationship between aggressors, or aggressor and victim.

Incidents of violence in which women are the victims has reached high proportions, not least because it is now more likely to be reported to, and followed up by, police. However, there is evidence to suggest that reports of the violence and its prevalence are given in sexualized terms (rape or sexual assault, or assault on the woman as object of hate) or in relation to intimate partner violence. Sexual or domestic violence is not the only aggression that women receive, but reports give the impression that it is. For example, in a ten-country study linking women's health and violence against women conducted by the World Health Organization (2010), the statistics are presented in terms of reported physical or sexual violence by a husband or partner (ranging between 15% and 71%, dependent on country) and non-consensual sex. There is little acknowledgement of the female recipient of violence that is not linked to rape/sexual assault or wife beating (domestic or intimate partner violence). It is as if these are the only types of victimization that women experience. Similarly, in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control estimate more than five million women suffer intimate-partner victimizations annually, with around 1,300 of these resulting in the death of the woman. Such figures are horrific, but also serve to hide other forms of violence, and give the impression that women are always passive recipients. Neither of the two above studies acknowledges that women can be perpetrators of the same aggression. In fact, research has established that intimate partner violence is bi-directional and that such aggression is more highly correlated with substance abuse than with either ethnicity or gender (Sullivan et al., 2009). This also is true when considering all other forms and level of violence. Olson and Lloyd (2005) suggest that less severe or 'minor' cases of aggression, including those within intimate relationships, are relatively equal across men and women. A possible source of understanding why female aggression is seen as less prevalent than male aggression might be the definition of aggression and the conflating of types of violence. In Olsen and Lloyd's study, women reported they had initiated aggression in 54 per cent of the events they discussed, although there was a confused or confusing view of what 'starting aggression' meant. Some women defined this as getting angry, or thought asking their partner to talk about issues of conflict was a form of aggression, and an initiation of conflict in itself. Moreover, 63 per cent of conflicts contained only verbal aggression linked

to the dynamics of conflict and communication in the relationship. Thus, these women define aggression as a complex issue, beyond (and before) the striking of blows. Women in this study also identified a range of motives for aggression, with 'rule' violation by the male partner and their own desire to gain attention or the male's compliance as the most likely reasons, together with psychological factors. This complex set of motives for initiating aggression is supported by a study by Hettrich and O'Leary (2007), in which 32 per cent of their sample of female college students who were in a relationship admitted they used physical aggression against their partners. Additionally, they reported that they used it more than their male partners, with anger at partners and poor communication being cited as reasons. However, they also reported that their male partners as more sexually coercive than they were and they were more dissatisfied with their relationships than the women who did not report using or experiencing violence within them. Hence, women appear to use aggression in particular ways within relationships, including as a way of expressing dissatisfaction or anger rather than simply as a means to harm another. These findings, however, still do not consider female aggression outside the immediate familial setting. Perhaps a consideration of criminal activity that involves aggressive acts might shed some light on this.

Violent Crime and Women

Aggression and violence are inseparable from crime, and the fear of crime influences a great deal of our behaviour and perception of others. It also influences research and practice in criminal psychology and other allied disciplines, and hence policy within justice systems. Women do commit crimes, and always have. However, there is a particular phenomenon surrounding conviction of female offenders, referred to as Chivalric Justice (Iacovetta & Valverde, 2002). This includes the circumstances of women receiving lesser sentences than men for the same kinds of crime. For example, the issue of sole female child molester generates responses of disbelief rather than the revulsion produced by male paedophiles (Gavin, 2010). Such an offender is also less likely to receive a custodial sentence than her male counterpart. This chivalric position is reflected in media reporting of crime by women. Grabe and Kamhawi (2006) observed what they noted as a patriarchal chivalry in news coverage of crime carried out by

women alone, but that the reporting is much harsher when women collaborate with men; they term the last the Bonnie and Clyde effect.

The complementary reaction to female offenders is one expressed in the 'evil woman hypothesis', the view that women who offend outside normative gender roles are doubly deviant (Mellor & Deering, 2010). This is particularly evident when considering women who participate in sexual murder with a male partner (Gavin, 2010). Moors Murderer Myra Hindley, for example, is seen as much more 'evil' and culpable than Ian Brady, as she was, after all, a woman, and women do not kill children.

In most places around the world, at least those in which we can view statistics with confidence, crime rates are falling in proportion to population figures, seen clearly in the report of agencies such as the UK Home Office (2012) and the US Bureau of Justice Statistics (2014). The only crime that appears to be growing is violent crime perpetrated by female offenders, although many postulate that this is a result of changes in reporting and arresting behaviour rather than any increase in female violence per se (Schwartz, Steffensmeier, & Feldmeyer, 2009). Similarly, there is a possibility that the perceived change in offences and arrest rates are an artefact of policy changes that reflect cultural changes in the perception of gender roles and gendered behaviour. There is still an overwhelming difference in the number of incidents attributed to men/boys and women/girls, but the increase in observed female violence does bear scrutiny. Moore (2007) contends that the ways in which young male and female offenders exhibit aggression are very similar, and that this is bound up with constantly changing views of masculinity and femininity. This is particularly important to address in the light of the falling-off in the rate of male-perpetrated violent crime, which is attributed to policies targeting this behaviour. This would suggest that female aggression needs a different focus in research and practice to that addressing male behaviour. There is evidence to suggest that, whilst parental aggression, antisocial peers and academic problems can be associated with aggressive behaviour in youths of both sexes, there are considerable differences in social and psychological factors related to aggression by women. These include levels of mental illness (usually depression) and physical or sexual victimization (Leschied, Cummings, Van Brunschot, Cunningham, & Saunders, 2000). Further distinguishing factors may be due to differences in impulsivity or the readiness to take risks (Campbell & Muncer, 2009). Studies that examine these issues suggest that, if the pertinent variables are subtracted from the analysis, disparity in