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Intimate partner violence theoretical considerations: Moving towards a contextual framework

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ABSTRACT

Several theories have been developed to provide a conceptual understanding of intimate partner violence (IPV) episodes. Although each of these theories has found some degree of empirical support, they are limited in their explanatory power of IPV episodes and their ability to significantly impact the efficacy of IPV prevention and treatment programs. The current paper provides a review and critique of current IPV theories and highlights strategies for improving upon these theories. An alternative theoretical conceptualization is introduced that incorporates existing IPV and functional analytic literature into a contextual framework for conceptualizing IPV episodes. Components of the IPV contextual framework include distal, static and proximal antecedents; motivating factors; behavioral repertoire; discriminative stimuli (i.e. environmental cues/signals); verbal rules; and IPV consequences. The proposed theoretical framework offers two primary advantages over former IPV theories. First, it provides a comprehensive conceptualization of IPV by integrating components of previous IPV theories and their related empirical findings into one, cohesive conceptual framework. Additionally, it allows for a more fine-grained analysis of more proximal variables potentially related to discrete IPV episodes. A discussion of how the proposed theoretical framework may influence future IPV research and clinical practice is provided.

Contents

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1. Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) continues to be a serious problem within the United States. Each year approximately 1.5 to 2 million women are physically assaulted by their intimate partners (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). The effects from IPV can be devastating. In 1992, data collected by the FBI indicated that approximately 28% of all female homicide victims were killed by their current or former male partners (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995). Some findings suggest that as many as 41% of all female victims of partner assault are injured by a significant other (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000), with annual healthcare costs among female IPV victims reaching as much as 19% higher than annual healthcare costs for women without an IPV history (Rivara et al., 2007). Based on these estimates, IPV has been considered to be the most common cause of injury for adult women (Stark & Flitcraft, 1988). Along with physical injuries, IPV victims are at greater risk for experiencing psychological distress following abusive incidents. Psychological problems associated with partner abuse include depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, and substance abuse (Golding, 1999; O'Leary, 1996; Stark & Flitcraft, 1988; Sugarman, Aldarondo, & Boney-McCoy, 1996; Testa & Leonard, 2001).

Several IPV theories have been proposed over the years and offer differing explanatory frameworks for conceptualizing IPV. Each of these theories has influenced IPV research, and many have found some degree of empirical support. Yet, all of these theories are limited in two primary ways. First, current IPV theories fail to adequately capture and address the complexity of variables implicated in IPV episodes. Second, while each of the current theories has found some level of support within the empirical literature, the extent to which these theories have successfully impacted IPV prevention and treatment programs has been limited (Babcock, Green, & Robie, 2004b; Wathen & MacMillan, 2003; Whitaker et al., 2006).

The purpose of the current paper is to provide a summary of some of the most widely recognized IPV theories and to discuss the limitations with these prevailing theories (see Table 1 for the synopsis). Additionally, this paper will present an alternative theoretical framework for conceptualizing IPV episodes that attempts to improve upon former IPV theories by incorporating existing theoretical and empirical IPV literature into a contextual framework. A discussion of how the current contextual framework can guide future IPV research and clinical practice will be provided.

2. IPV theories

2.1. Sociocultural theories

2.1.1. Feminist theory

One of the oldest and most well-known theories, often referred to as the Feminist Model, seeks to understand violent relationships by examining the sociocultural context in which these relationships develop. Many supporters of this theory view sexism and female inequality within patriarchal societies as the main causes of IPV (Dobash & Dobash, 1977; Lenton, 1995; Walker, 1984; Yllo, 1988). Gender roles defined by society and taught to individuals during childhood are thought to place men in positions of power over women (Dobash & Dobash, 1977; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). According to Walker (1984), these socially-defined gender roles lead to victimization of women and perpetration of violence against women by men. Proponents of the feminist theory suggest that various tactics, including physical violence, may be used by men to control and exert their dominance over women and their families (Dobash & Dobash, 1977; Pence & Paymar, 2006). Based on this theory, Yllo (1988) and others have argued that research on partner abuse should use non-patriarchal, qualitative methods, and treatment should focus primarily on addressing men's domineering behaviors and patriarchal beliefs (McMahon & Pence, 1996).

Support for the feminist theory stems from descriptive, correlational research examining the relationship between men's endorsements of patriarchal values and their respective rates of physical violence against their partners. Results from some of these studies indicate that families are at a greater risk for experiencing IPV when husbands hold traditional sex-role attitudes and when there are greater discrepancies between the husbands' and wives' acceptance of patriarchal values (Leonard & Senchak, 1996; Smith, 1990). Additional evidence cited in support of this theory indicates a high rate of wife assaults in states with primarily husband-dominant families and high status women (Yllo, 1983; Yllo & Straus, 1984).

2.1.2. Power theory

Power theorists argue that the roots of violence stem not only from within the culture, but also from within the family structure (Straus, 1976). Family conflict, social acceptance of violence, and gender inequality are hypothesized to interact and lead to the

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Table 1
Summary of IPV theories

IPV theory	Literature cited	Variables of interest	Theoretical limitations
Feminist theory	Dobash & Dobash (1977), Walker (1979), Yllo & Bograd (1988)	Female inequality; power imbalances between sexes; sexism stemming from society's patriarchal beliefs	Mixed empirical support; fails to explain IPV in same-sex couples; limited impact on IPV prevention/treatment; restricted flexibility in accommodating novel IPV findings; limited scope
Power theory	Straus (1976), Straus (1977), Straus et al. (1980)	Family conflict, social acceptance of violence, gender inequality, societal beliefs about IPV	Mixed empirical support; restricted flexibility in accommodating novel IPV findings; limited impact on IPV prevention/treatment; limited scope
Social learning theory	Mihalic & Elliott (1997), Kalmuss (1984), O'Leary (1988)	Family conflict; modeling; reinforcing consequences of aggression; sex-role characteristics	Mixed empirical support; limited impact on IPV prevention/treatment; limited scope
Background/situational model	Riggs & O'Leary (1989), Riggs & O'Leary (1996)	Background = abuse & aggression history; psychopathology; social acceptance of violence; arousability; aggressive personality characteristics Situational = interpersonal conflict; substance use; relationship satisfaction; intimacy levels; problem-solving skills; violence expectancy beliefs; communication style	Limited impact on IPV prevention/treatment; somewhat restricted in scope
Borderline personality organization and assaultiveness theory	Dutton (1995)	Insecure attachment and shaming during childhood/adolescent development	Limited empirical support; limited impact on IPV prevention/treatment; restricted flexibility in accommodating novel IPV findings; limited scope
Developmental model of batterer subtypes	Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart (1994), Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan (2004)	Genetic/prenatal factors; early childhood family experiences; peer experiences; attachment to others; impulsivity; social skills; attitudes toward women & violence	Restricted flexibility in accommodating novel IPV findings; limited scope

intervening in cases of partner abuse, which may then result in the continuation of family violence. The use of violence to address family conflicts is believed to be learned in childhood by either witnessing or experiencing physical abuse (Straus, 1977). Psychosocial stressors, including economic hardships, are thought to increase family tension and place the family at a higher risk for engaging in physical violence (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Witt, 1987). Power theorists also suggest that power imbalances between husbands and wives may increase the amount of tension within the family, thus, increasing the risk of intimate partner aggression (Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 1999; Straus, 1977). A number of studies have found higher IPV rates in families high in conflict, with greater levels of stress, and from lower socioeconomic statuses (Cascardi & Vivian, 1995; Coleman & Straus, 1986; Gelles, 1980; Leonard & Senchak, 1996; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). Studies examining the impact of power structure on rates of family violence have also found the lowest levels of physical aggression in more egalitarian couples, supporting the notion that power imbalances may increase IPV risk (Coleman & Straus, 1986; Gray-Little, Baucom, & Hamby, 1996).

2.2. Individual theories

2.2.1. Social learning theory

Based on models initially developed by Bandura (Bandura, 1971; Bandura, 1973), social learning theorists hypothesize that violence against intimate partners is initially acquired through modeling during childhood. Similar to the power theory, social learning theory proposes that methods for settling family conflicts are often learned during childhood by observing parental and peer relationships (Bowen, 1978; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). Victims and perpetrators of partner abuse are thought to have either witnessed abuse or directly experienced physical abuse as children, resulting in the development of tolerance or acceptance of violence within the family (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001). Indeed, a summary of previous research findings on intergenerational violence indicate that witnessing or experiencing abuse as a child may be associated with the future victimization and perpetration of partner abuse (Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986; Kalmuss, 1984; Leonard & Senchak, 1996; Shook, Gerrity, Jurich, & Segrist, 2000). Whether or not violence continues into adulthood is thought to be dependent on the consequences associated with early episodes of violence in peer and dating relationships (Riggs, Caulfield, & Street, 2000). IPV is believed to be maintained if it serves a purpose or has been appropriately reinforced (Mihalic & Elliott, 1997). Thus, positive outcomes following partner abuse may increase a person's expectations that future violence will result in similar outcomes, and consequently result in continued use of physical aggression (Riggs & O'Leary, 1989). Social learning theorists emphasize that direct reinforcement of violent behavior is not required to maintain that behavior. Instead, simply witnessing either positive or negative consequences of violent behavior may be sufficient in determining whether or not an individual will engage in future violent episodes (Riggs & O'Leary, 1989). Additional

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emphasis is placed on sex-role characteristics that may further encourage and reinforce IPV (Ehrensaft & Vivian, 1999; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Riggs & Caulfield, 1997). Social learning theory has been influential in the development of batterer treatment programs, where an emphasis is placed on skills training targeted at teaching batterers to adopt new non-violent methods for addressing family conflict (Scott, 2004).

2.2.2. Background/situational model

Riggs and O'Leary (1989, 1996) developed a model to explain a form of IPV, namely courtship aggression, that expanded on social learning theory. The model describes two general components, background and situational factors, that are thought to contribute to the development and maintenance of courtship aggression, and identifies key predictor factors for interpersonal aggression within each component. The background component refers to historical, societal, and individual characteristics that determine who will become aggressive. Background factors include a history of witnessing or experiencing abuse, aggressive personality characteristics, arousability, prior use of aggression, psychopathology, and social acceptance of aggression as a means to handle conflict. The second component refers to situational factors that set the stage for violence to occur. Interpersonal conflict, substance use, relationship satisfaction, intimacy levels, problem-solving skills, personal expectations of outcomes to violence, and communication styles are all situational factors that are believed to be related to the onset of a violent episode (Riggs & O'Leary, 1989). The authors propose that the interaction between these two components may impact the intensity of conflict within a couple, and, thus, determine whether or not physical violence will occur (Riggs & O'Leary, 1989).

Studies examining this model have found some empirical evidence to support this theory. Background factors such as witnessing violence, attitudes towards the use of aggression, parental aggression, and prior use of violence were all found to be predictors of intimate partner violence (Riggs & O'Leary, 1996). In addition, degree of relationship conflict, partner's use of verbal and physical aggression, and alcohol problems also seemed to impact the onset of courtship aggression (Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; White et al., 2001). Overall, the background/situational model accounted for approximately 60% of the variance in male-to-female incidents of partner abuse (Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; White et al., 2001). Furthermore, situational factors appeared to account for a larger proportion of variance than did the background factors in explaining courtship aggression (White et al., 2001).

2.2.3. Personality/typology theories

Several attempts have been made to identify psychopathology and personality characteristics that may increase a person's susceptibility to perpetrating IPV. Two of these approaches often cited within the literature include Dutton's Borderline Personality Organization (BPO) and Assaultiveness theory and Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart's Developmental Model of Batterer Subtypes (Dutton, 1995; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). Both of these theories emphasize the role of attachment, early childhood experiences, and impulsivity in IPV perpetration (Dutton, 1995; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994).

Based on attachment theory, Dutton's BPO theory posits that the propensity to perpetrate IPV in adulthood stems from insecure attachment and shaming arising during early childhood/adolescence. Individuals with this attachment style are characterized by having a desire for intimate social contact while also experiencing a fear of rejection and distrust of others, resulting in frequent dissatisfaction with intimate relationships. This fearful attachment style, taken in conjunction with these individuals' proclivity towards experiencing intense bouts of anger, is thought to lead to instances of IPV perpetration during instances in which the individual feels threatened by the partner or believes that the relationship has failed in some way (Dutton, 1995).

Influenced heavily by prevailing IPV empirical and theoretical findings, Holtzworth-Munroe and Stuart (1994) proposed the Developmental Model of Batterer Subtypes for predicting the development of three batterer subtypes that identifies three distal and five proximal variables believed to be causally related to IPV perpetration. The three distal variables, including genetic/prenatal factors, early childhood family experiences, and peer experiences, are thought to influence the development of more proximal variables associated with IPV perpetration, namely attachment to others, impulsivity, social skills, and attitudes toward women and violence (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). The authors suggested that the presence of various combinations of these distal and proximal variables would lead to the development of one of the three batterer subtypes, namely Family-Only, Dysphoric/Borderline, and Generally Violent and Antisocial batterers (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). Research validating the typology model confirmed the presence of the three hypothesized batterer subtypes, along with an additional subtype defined as Low-Level Antisocial batterers (Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, & Stuart, 2000).

3. Limitations of existing IPV theories

There are a number of limitations with existing IPV theories. Whereas some of these limitations are specific to certain IPV theoretical approaches, others are pertinent to most if not all of the IPV theories. One central limitation identified for several of the existing IPV theoretical theories is the lack of or mixed empirical support for certain theoretical tenets. For instance, Dutton's BPO theory has not been rigorously tested beyond initial studies conducted by the theory's author to determine the theory's viability (Dutton, 1995). Conversely, although both the feminist and power theories have been partially supported by findings within the empirical literature (discussed earlier within this paper), additional research fails to support particular tenets of each theory. For example, while some empirical evidence supporting the feminist theory indicates a relationship between patriarchal beliefs and IPV rates, other researchers have found no consistent relationship between patriarchal beliefs, male-dominated families, and rates of partner violence (Coleman & Straus, 1986; Dutton, 1995; Hotaling & Sugarman, 1986). In fact, some studies have found less partner violence in families where the husband held more traditional, patriarchal values (Campbell, 1992; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Sorenson & Telles, 1991). Furthermore, if strong patriarchal values directly lead to male-initiated partner aggression, then one

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would expect that patriarchal societies should experience greater levels of male-to-female violence than egalitarian or female-dominated cultures (Goodyear-Smith & Laidlaw, 1999). However, studies examining cultural differences associated with violence have found no association between patriarchal cultures and increased rates of male-initiated partner abuse (Kumagai & Straus, 1983; Sorenson & Telles, 1991). Similarly mixed findings have been noted for the power theory of IPV, with some recent meta-analytic findings suggesting that socioeconomic factors and stress may play a less significant role in IPV perpetration than initially hypothesized (Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004).

Foremost among the existing IPV theoretical limitations, as noted previously, is the failure of former theories to adequately capture the complexity of IPV perpetration. Recent studies highlight the apparent heterogeneity of IPV, including variability in IPV types, severity, function, and victim/perpetrator role (e.g. mutual violence vs. male-to-female vs. female-to-male IPV) (Holtzworth-Munroe & Meehan, 2004; Johnson, 1995; Stuart et al., 2006). Each of the theories described above identifies a subset of variables hypothesized to be causally related to IPV perpetration (e.g. sociocultural factors, relationship characteristics, early development factors, etc…), and a degree of empirical support has been provided for each of these theories. Yet, each of these theories is limited in its power to fully predict IPV perpetration. Additionally, many of the existing theories are lacking in their ability to explain apparently contradictory findings. For example, feminist theory is unable to explain findings from several studies indicating no relationship between changes in attitudes toward women and IPV perpetration rates following batterers' treatment (see Scott, 2004 for review), and has been criticized for its failure to account for why some men with traditional sex-role values do not physically assault their spouses (Jacobson, 1994; Lenton, 1995). Similarly, the social learning model has been criticized for its inability to address findings contrary to the theory's intergenerational transmission of violence hypothesis that indicate that a substantial number of victims and perpetrators deny witnessing or experiencing abuse as children, and numerous survivors of childhood abuse never become adult victims or perpetrators of partner violence (Alexander, Moore, & Alexander, 1991; Riggs et al., 2000; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981).While greater strides have been taken recently to address the apparent heterogeneity of IPV cases, such as the creation of batterer subtypes (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994), further improvements to IPV theory and research need to be made to fully take into account the complexity and diversity of IPV perpetration (Bogat, Levendosky, & von Eye, 2005).

An additional limitation to current IPV theories is the absence of a theoretically-derived, systematic strategy for selecting and modifying the inclusion of variables into a predictive model of IPV perpetration. The development of new IPV theories is often heavily influenced by prevailing IPV theory and research. Although it is important for theoretical development to incorporate existing literature where appropriate, this strategy can also limit the theory's flexibility over time by constraining the boundaries of the conceptualization to fit a particular IPV zeitgeist. As such, it may be challenging to incorporate within the existing theory innovative empirical findings that identify novel variables relevant for understanding IPV perpetration. For instance, within a particular theory, such as the feminist or power theory, that does not consider psychopathology or personality factors as causally related variables, it may be difficult to incorporate empirical findings indicating that certain personality characteristics and psychopathology may be associated with increased risk for IPV perpetration (Hastings & Hamberger, 1994; Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 2000; Murphy, Meyer, & O'Leary, 1993). Furthermore, it may be difficult to make accommodations within the existing theory for empirical findings that in some way counter or contradict the theory's tenets without altering or dismantling the theoretical framework in a meaningful and significant way. For example, the feminist theory has been criticized for its failure to adequately explain female IPV perpetration and IPV in same-sex relationships where the “victim” and “perpetrator” roles are more indistinguishable, and may be less influenced by traditional sex-role beliefs (Goodyear-Smith & Laidlaw, 1999; Holtzworth-Munroe, 2005; Marrujo & Kreger, 1996; Straus, 2006). It seems that the basic tenets of the feminist theory would need to be substantially altered and extend beyond traditional patriarchal beliefs and gender roles in order to fully account for IPV within same-sex relationships.

Existing IPV theories are also limited in their ability to effectively improve the clinical efficacy of IPV prevention and treatment programs. Although many of these theories have played a significant role in influencing IPV prevention and treatment programs, to date these programs have been relatively ineffective in reducing IPV perpetration rates over time (Babcock et al., 2004b; Holtzworth-Munroe, 2002; Rhatigan, Moore, & Street, 2005; Scott, 2004). While the small effect sizes in batterer treatment programs may be at least partially attributable to outcome studies' methodological limitations, high attrition rates, and difficulties translating theory into clinical practice (Babcock et al., 2004b), it is also possible that the efficacy of these programs and IPV prevention programs is constrained by the field's limited theoretical and empirical understanding of proximal variables related to IPV episodes (Rhatigan et al., 2005; Whitaker et al., 2006). Many of the existing IPV theories identify static and distal variables, such as genetic disposition, early developmental experiences, attachment style, and personality characteristics, which may be less malleable to change and, thus, may be less useful variables to target within an IPV prevention or treatment setting.

The number of competing IPV theories in existence has also resulted in divisiveness among researchers within the field. Part of this division stems from the overall political and social climate under which IPV theoretical development and research is conducted. Historically, IPV was not recognized as a social problem within the United States until the 1970s and 1980s when IPV research influenced the development of spousal abuse legislation (Straus, 1992). Those who became involved in conducting IPV research were not only interested in improving the field's understanding and treatment of IPV, but were often also invested in the ideology of family violence social movements (Straus, 1992). As a result, disagreements arose amongst researchers when scientific pursuits conflicted with beliefs around a particular social movement (Straus, 1992). Central to many of these disagreements was how IPV was to be theorized and then studied. In addition to these ideological conflicts, greater distance is created between researchers due to the interdisciplinary nature of IPV research. While there has been some movement over the recent years towards collaboration among IPV researchers across differing theoretical orientations and academic disciplines (Jasinski & Williams, 1998), there continues to exist a divide between researchers on how to conceptualize and approach IPV research. This

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continued divisiveness has limited the extent to which IPV theories are integrated into comprehensive theoretical frameworks that may enhance the field's understanding of IPV perpetration (Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Rhatigan et al., 2005).

4. Future IPV theoretical directions

Given the limitations of existing IPV theories, many have argued for the creation of new IPV theoretical frameworks that improve upon former IPV theories in several notable ways (Bogat et al., 2005; Rhatigan et al., 2005; Sellers, Cochran, & Branch, 2005; Whitaker et al., 2006; Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005). First, new IPV theories should be more comprehensive in nature, taking into consideration the perspectives of both victims and perpetrators and integrating views from multiple academic disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and criminal justice (Rhatigan et al., 2005). Additionally, newly formed IPV theories should be more idiographic in nature, accounting for the significant heterogeneity of IPV identified within the literature (Bogat et al., 2005). Correspondingly, future theoretical perspectives and related IPV research should address the context and proximal events associated with IPV episodes (Bogat et al., 2005; Hamberger & Guse, 2005; O'Leary & Slep, 2006; Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005).

Initial strides have recently been made to take a more contextual approach to conceptualizing IPV episodes. As discussed previously, Riggs and O'Leary's (1989, 1996) Background/Situational Model included contextual variables thought to be more proximally related to IPV episodes, including social skills deficits, interpersonal conflict, expected outcomes of violent behavior, and substance use. More recently, Wilkinson and Hamerschlag (2005) presented an approach for conceptualizing IPV using a situational or event perspective that examines the context surrounding IPV episodes. The authors encouraged IPV researchers to investigate the "violence process," examining the nature of the violent relationship, the events and conditions preceding the IPV episode, motivations for engaging in the violent act, and the outcomes following the IPV episode (Wilkinson & Hamerschlag, 2005). Similarly, Myers (1995) proposed utilizing behavior analytic theory for conceptualizing IPV episodes, which offered a contextual analysis of IPV perpetration that stresses the importance of outcomes on future occurrences of IPV perpetration. The author suggested that IPV perpetration that results in increased compliance by the victim, praise from others, or avoidance of ridicule by others may increase the likelihood that IPV perpetration will occur in the future under similar conditions. Myers' (Myers, 1995) also noted the influence of cultural rules and beliefs that describe potential outcomes of IPV and can increase the likelihood that IPV will be initiated and maintained within the relationship. Using a similar approach, Bell and Naugle (2005) presented a theoretical conceptualization of stay/leave decisions in violent relationships incorporating basic and contemporary behavior analytic principles. The authors highlighted contextual factors implicated in stay/leave decisions, such as alternative housing accessibility and police and social network responsiveness to IPV incidents, and discussed how these contextual variables could impact the likelihood that a victim would leave a violent relationship.

The movement towards taking a contextual approach to IPV is also becoming evident within the IPV empirical literature. Several studies have begun to examine proximal antecedents or precipitants thought to be associated with the onset of IPV perpetration, including substance use, verbal arguments, partner's physical aggression, relationship factors, and chronic and acute stress (Babcock, Costa, Green, & Eckhardt, 2004a; Fals-Stewart, 2003; Fals-Stewart, Golden, & Schumacher, 2003; Frye & Karney, 2006; O'Leary & Slep, 2006). Additional research has investigated reasons for engaging in IPV perpetration along with the emotional and behavioral responses to IPV (Hamberger & Guse, 2005; Stuart et al., 2006).

Although initial steps have been taken to conceptualize and investigate the context surrounding IPV episodes, significant progress within this area is still needed. A great deal of additional research is necessary to identify and better understand the variables and interactions between variables proximally related to IPV episodes. To date, there is still no well-defined, comprehensive contextual theory that offers a framework for identifying proximal variables likely to be associated with IPV episodes. Without this "roadmap," researchers are left with little guidance for systematically examining the context of IPV episodes.

5. Current contextual framework

5.1. Overview

In order to improve upon former IPV theories and create a framework for investigating variables proximally related to IPV episodes, we developed a theoretical framework of IPV that offers a contextual analysis of IPV perpetration. This contextual framework incorporates empirical findings from existing IPV literature while integrating and expanding former IPV theories, drawing heavily from the Behavior Analytic (Myers, 1995), Social Learning (Bandura, 1971; Bandura, 1973; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997), and Background/Situational (Riggs & O'Leary, 1989; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996) theories. Similar to Myer's (1995) theory, the current IPV theoretical framework is derived from principles of human behavior established through basic laboratory research, which are then applied to an analysis of IPV perpetration.

As indicated in Fig. 1 and described in detail below, multiple contextual units are hypothesized to be implicated in the perpetration of IPV, and within each unit a number of potentially relevant proximal variables are identified. The listings of proximal variables provided under each contextual unit are not exhaustive. Instead, the broader contextual units can be used to help identify new variables that may be salient to IPV perpetration as well as to assist in generating hypotheses on how formerly identified variables may be proximally related to IPV perpetration. Researchers have the opportunity to selectively investigate the context surrounding IPV episodes from either a micro- or macro-level perspective by examining the impact of a particular contextual unit or variable(s) within the unit on IPV perpetration or by investigating the interrelationships between two or more contextual units and their relative association with IPV perpetration.

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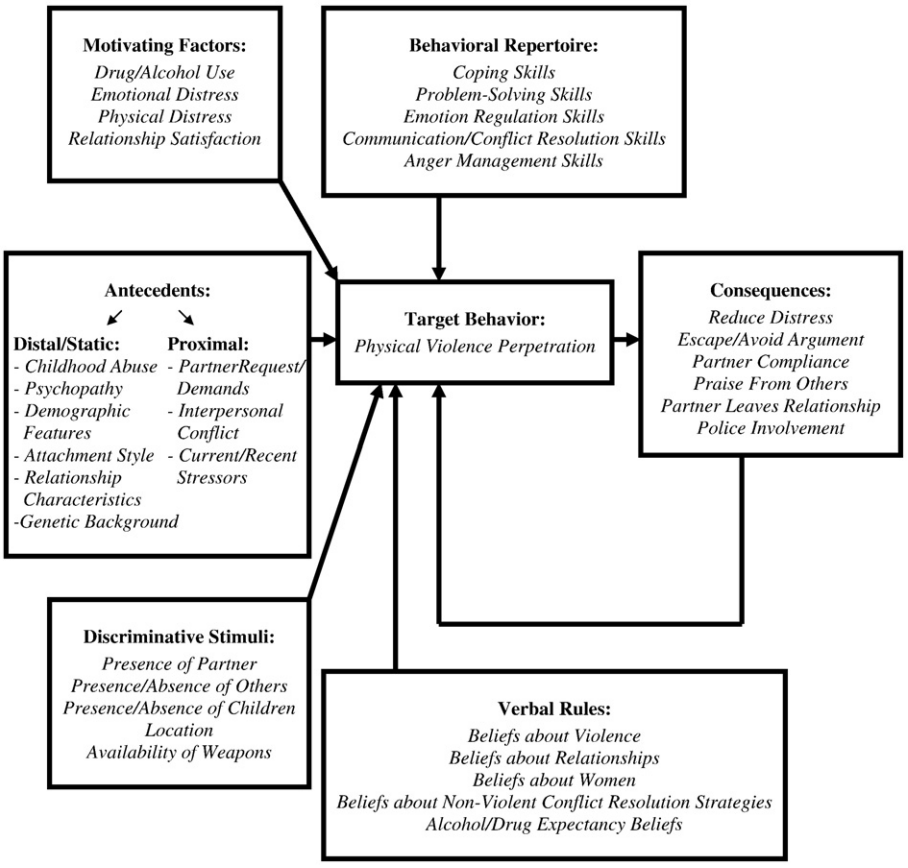

Fig. 1. IPV contextual framework.

This contextual framework is advantageous in several ways. First, it offers a theoretically-driven, systematic strategy for identifying and examining variables that may have a proximal relationship with IPV perpetration. Additionally, it provides increased flexibility for integrating new and seemingly contradictory findings without drastically changing the overall integrity of the theoretical conceptualization. The contextual framework can also allow for a greater idiographic analysis of IPV perpetration by identifying and examining different sets of variables that increase risk for IPV perpetration under specific and unique conditions. Given the heterogeneity of IPV, it is plausible that various "recipes" for IPV perpetration exist, each consisting of a different combination of variables within each contextual unit that, taken together, increase risk for IPV perpetration. By focusing on factors proximally related to IPV perpetration, the proposed theoretical framework may prove to be beneficial in improving IPV prevention and treatment programs through the identification of variables that may be more amenable to change. Lastly, through the integration of concepts and empirical findings from various IPV theories, this contextual framework may help to bridge commonalities across IPV researchers and increase efforts for collaboration among IPV researchers from varying social science disciplines and theoretical orientations.

5.2. Contextual units of analysis

Provided below is a description of each contextual unit as it theoretically applies to IPV episodes. As mentioned previously, the units of analysis are based on principles of human behavior derived from the behavioral and functional analytic literature. Due to the constraints of the current paper, an in-depth summary of the behavioral and functional analytic literature as it pertains to each contextual unit will not be provided. Instead, each contextual unit will be briefly defined and primary emphasis will be placed on discussing the theorized relationship between each contextual unit and IPV perpetration. Please refer to Malott, Malott, and Trojan (2000), O'Donahue (1998), or Catania (1984) for a comprehensive summary of the behavioral principles incorporated in the current analysis.

5.2.1. Target behavior

The target behavior is the dependent variable or the problematic behavior of interest. Within the IPV literature, the problematic behavior of interest can include three primary forms of abuse: physical, sexual and psychological aggression (Dutton & Gondolf,

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2000; Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, Bates, & Sandin, 1997; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998; Saunders, 1992; Walker, 1979). In defining the target behavior, considerations should be given regarding the type(s), severity, and role (i.e. perpetration vs. victimization) to include within the definition. For the purposes of the current conceptual analysis, we will limit our definition of the target behavior to include only mild to severe instances of physical aggression perpetration. However, it should be noted that a similar contextual analysis would be appropriate for conceptualizing episodes of IPV victimization as well as other forms of IPV at varying degrees of severity.

5.2.2. Antecedents

In the current conceptual analysis, our usage of the term "antecedents" adopts a definition similar to that described by Kantor (1970) in reference to "setting components" or "setting events" (see also Smith & Iwata, 1997 for review of Kantor's definition). Antecedents are stimuli or events that precede the target behavior and impact the likelihood that the target behavior will occur. Distinct from Kantor's definition of "setting events," we extracted two unique forms of antecedents, namely discriminative stimuli and motivating factors, and included them as separate contextual units within the contextual framework (described below).

For the purposes of the current conceptual analysis, we also make a distinction between distal/static and proximal antecedents. Distal variables include background factors that are considered more temporally remote and do not necessarily have a direct effect on the target behavior, but may be indirectly associated with the target behavior through their association with other variables that are more directly related to the target behavior (DeMaris, Benson, Fox, & Van Wyk, 2003). In a contextual analysis of IPV, distal antecedents might include childhood abuse history, early development attachment experiences, relationship history, and criminal background. Alternatively, static antecedents may exist within temporal proximity to the target behavior, but remain relatively stable over time and can be present under circumstances when the target behavior is either absent or present. Thus, similar to distal variables, static antecedents may be less apt to have a direct association with the target behavior, but may be associated with the target behavior through relationships with other contextual variables. Static antecedents within a contextual analysis of IPV can include variables such as genetic make-up, personality traits, demographic features including SES and racial/ethnic background, relationship characteristics (e.g. type of relationship), psychiatric disorders (e.g. Borderline Personality Disorder). Lastly, proximal antecedents include variables that are temporally proximate to the target behavior, context-dependent, and generally more variable across time. Proximal antecedents are considered to have greater direct impact on the target behavior than more distal and static antecedents. Proximal antecedents potentially related to IPV may include partner requests/demands; interpersonal conflict including verbal aggression and physical aggression perpetrated by the partner; other aversive interaction with partner (e.g. ignored by partner); and current/recent stressors.

5.2.3. Discriminative stimuli

Discriminative stimuli denotes a distinct class of antecedents involving stimuli, events, or conditions whose presence preceding the target behavior signals that the target behavior may be more likely to be reinforced (see below for definition of reinforcement). As such, the presence of a discriminative stimulus can momentarily increase the likelihood that the target behavior will occur (Michael, 1982). For example, in the presence of an individual's spouse (versus in the presence of a stranger or acquaintance), the individual's verbal response "I love you" may be more likely to be reinforced by the individual's spouse replying with "I love you too." Concerning IPV episodes, discriminative stimuli that could signal an opportunity for physical aggression to be reinforced include the presence of the partner, the presence or absence of others, the presence or absence of children, the location (e.g. private vs. public setting), and the immediate availability/accessibility of weapons.

5.2.4. Motivating factors

Referred to in the functional analytic literature as "motivating operations," motivating factors are antecedent stimuli, events, or conditions that can temporarily change the potency of reinforcers or punishers (defined below) and, therefore, can momentarily impact the likelihood that the target behavior will occur (Laraway, Snycerski, Michael, & Poling, 2003). Examples of motivating factors often given include aversive state conditions such as hunger, thirst, and physical pain (Laraway et al., 2003; Michael, 1982). Under these conditions, certain reinforcers may become temporarily more salient and can result in an increase in behavior that has in the past resulted in attainment of that reinforcer. Thus, under a state of hunger, food becomes more effective as a reinforcer and behavior that has led to receipt of food in the past (e.g. going to a fast food establishment, ordering food, and paying money for food) is more likely to occur.

Motivating factors may be particularly relevant within the context of IPV episodes. For example, within the IPV literature, empirical findings indicate that perpetration of physical aggression against one's partner is more likely to occur under the state of alcohol or drug intoxication (Fals-Stewart, 2003; Fals-Stewart et al., 2003). Therefore, it is possible that substance use (or the state of being under the influence of drugs or alcohol) may temporarily alter the potency of reinforcers or punishers associated with IPV perpetration and may momentarily increase the likelihood that physical aggression will occur. Additional motivating factors potentially related to IPV episodes include states of emotional distress (including anger, fear, and jealousy), physical distress, and relationship satisfaction that proximally precede the occurrence of IPV perpetration.[1]

[1] Note that in this analysis emotional distress is considered a state-dependent, motivating condition affecting the potency of reducing emotional distress as a consequence of engaging in IPV perpetration. This is distinct from the stressors identified as proximal antecedents, which are considered setting events that impact the likelihood that IPV perpetration will occur.

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5.2.5. Behavioral repertoire

Behavioral repertoire, broadly defined, refers to socially adaptive skill sets that a person can perform competently under appropriate conditions to successfully attain a desired consequence. Behavioral repertoire deficits can result in an increase in maladaptive behavior in order to attain the same desired consequence. Various behavioral repertoire deficits have been hypothesized to be implicated in IPV perpetration, including problem-solving, conflict resolution, and emotion regulation skills deficits, and improving skillfulness within these deficient areas has been the target of several IPV prevention and treatment programs (Anglin & Holtzworth-Munroe, 1997; Babcock et al., 2004b; Claerhout, Elder, & Janes, 1982; McNamara, Ertl, & Neufeld, 1998; Whitaker et al., 2006). For instance, several batterer treatment programs are designed under the assumption that batterers lack the skills to effectively deal with conflict. Thus, many of these programs include an anger management component that involves teaching batterers to use certain conflict resolution and emotional-regulating skills to address conflicts within their relationships (Babcock et al., 2004b).

5.2.6. Verbal rules[2]

Verbal rules are verbal stimuli that influence the target behavior by describing the potential outcomes of engaging in a particular behavior. For example, an individual who follows the rule "It's o.k. to express your anger by hitting your partner" may be more likely to act physically aggressive towards his/her partner in order to express or communicate feelings of anger. Verbal rules are unique in that they can impact the target behavior regardless of whether or not verbally defined outcomes have ever actually followed the target behavior (Hayes & Ju, 1998). For instance, an individual following the verbal rule "Sometimes you need to act aggressively towards your partner in order to solve a disagreement" may engage in IPV perpetration in an attempt to resolve a disagreement with their partner even if IPV perpetration has never previously resulted in resolution of the problem. A contextual analysis of verbal rules may be particularly relevant for researchers interested in pursuing facets of the feminist theory describing the impact of patriarchal beliefs on IPV perpetration. Additional verbal rules that may be relevant to IPV perpetration include beliefs about the use of non-violent conflict resolution strategies, cultural beliefs related to aggression, and expectancy beliefs about the impact of substance use on aggression.

5.2.7. Consequences — reinforcement

Reinforcing consequences are outcomes following the target behavior that increase the likelihood that the target behavior will occur under similar conditions in the future. Reinforcing consequences can include the addition or subtraction of a variety of stimuli, events, or conditions, with the overall function being an increase in the future occurrence of the target behavior. Within a contextual analysis of IPV, additive reinforcing consequences may include increasing the partner's compliant behavior, receiving praise from others, receiving the partner's attention, increasing the stability of the relationship, increasing feelings of empowerment/control, and increasing physical arousal. Alternatively, subtractive reinforcing consequences may involve escaping or avoiding a verbal argument, terminating the partner's use of physical aggression, or reducing emotional or physical distress.

5.2.8. Consequences — punishment

Punishing consequences are outcomes that follow the target behavior and reduce the likelihood that the target behavior will occur under similar circumstances in the future. Often these punishing consequences are considered aversive, unpleasant, or distressing to an individual. Within the criminal justice system, punishing consequences can involve such actions as arrest and imprisonment in an effort to deter batterers from engaging in IPV perpetration in the future. Additional punishing consequences may also follow IPV episodes and reduce the likely occurrence of future IPV events, including termination of the relationship; physical injury; increased emotional distress; reduced relationship satisfaction; and increased criticism by others.

6. Contextual framework implications and future directions

Although the current theoretical framework provides a number of potential advantages over current IPV theories, its viability as an empirically-validated IPV conceptualization has yet to be determined. Future research is necessary in order to examine the extent to which each contextual unit as well as the contextual framework as a whole adequately predicts IPV episodes above and beyond current IPV theories. Forthcoming research evaluating this theoretical framework should investigate the extent to which individual contextual units and variables within each contextual unit are functionally related to IPV episodes. Additional research targeted at the identification of novel, potentially relevant proximal variables within each contextual unit may also be important in enriching the current theoretical framework. Lastly, although the theoretical framework presented in Fig. 1 illustrates each contextual unit as being of equal importance and functionally impacting IPV perpetration independently, it is likely that certain contextual units have greater weight in impacting IPV perpetration than others and that interactions between various contextual units exist, which jointly function to increase risk for IPV perpetration. Given our limited understanding of the key contextual variables associated with IPV, it is premature to make assumptions of the relative importance of certain contextual units and interaction among these units. Future research is needed to researchers should examine the relationships between individual variables and contextual units to determine the degree to which these interactions enhance our understanding and prediction of IPV.

Conducting a contextual analysis of IPV using the proposed theoretical framework presents several challenges for researchers. First, it may be difficult, if not impossible initially, to design a study that adequately examines the theoretical framework in its entirety. Indeed, we expect that this contextual framework will spark a series of studies investigating particular units or

[2] For the purposes of the current paper, we chose to use the term "verbal rules" rather than "beliefs" to describe this particular unit within the analysis. We decided to use this terminology in order to remain consistent with the general behavioral concepts from which this contextual analysis is based.

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combinations of units and their functional relationship with IPV episodes. As this research line progresses, we anticipate that knowledge gained from earlier studies will guide the development of research targeted at investigating the adequacy of this theoretical framework as a whole. Secondly, unlike some other forms of human behavior, direct observation of IPV perpetration is limited within a laboratory setting. Instead, the majority of IPV research relies on self-reported accounts provided by IPV victims and perpetrators (Rhatigan et al., 2005). As a result, much of the IPV empirical findings are based on retrospective data that may be subject to reporting bias due to memory recall problems, social desirability, and perception bias (Armstrong et al., 2001; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1997; Yoshihama & Gillespie, 2002). More recently, however, researchers have begun to use innovative strategies, such as daily diary methods, to gather prospective data on IPV episodes, which may help to minimize errors in data collection due to memory recall problems (e.g. Fals-Stewart et al., 2003). Using this methodology, researchers are able to collect information regarding the proximal events that surround IPV episodes over consecutive days within a naturalistic setting (Rhatigan et al., 2005). This methodological approach might be particularly suitable for assessing contextual variables proximally related to IPV episodes and determining the extent to which these variables evolve across time.

The proposed theoretical framework has the potential to offer significant improvements in IPV prevention and treatment programs. For instance, a contextual analysis of IPV episodes could be incorporated into the clinical assessment of IPV cases, which would allow for the identification of variables contextually-relevant to particular IPV cases and offer greater individualization of IPV treatment plans. As such, individualized treatment plans could be tailored to target specific skills deficits, verbal rules, motivating factors, and environmental conditions that increase a particular person's risk for IPV perpetration. Although current measures exist to assess prevalence rates of specific acts of IPV (e.g. the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale, CTS-II; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), few assessment tools have been developed to specifically examine the context of IPV episodes. Of those contextual measures that have been developed (e.g. Babcock et al., 2004a; Stuart et al., 2006), none have provided a strategy for comprehensively assessing each of the contextual units identified in the proposed contextual framework. Thus, in order to fully investigate the context surrounding IPV episodes, measurement tools need to be developed that adequately assess for the broad array of contextual factors associated with IPV perpetration.

The proposed contextual framework could also guide the development of IPV prevention and intervention programs geared towards victims of IPV. Previous research indicates that IPV victims are often likely to disclose IPV victimization to their therapist or other healthcare provider (Cascardi, Langhinrichsen, & Vivian, 1992; O'Leary, Vivian, & Malone, 1992), offering a unique opportunity to intervene and potentially reduce the risk of future IPV victimization. Based on empirical findings from IPV contextual analyses, victims or potential victims of IPV could receive training on how to identify and respond to contextually-specific proximal variables signaling a possible increased risk for IPV victimization within a given situation. A similar approach has been taken within the sexual assault literature with some promising initial findings (e.g. Gidycz, McNamara, & Edwards, 2006; Hanson & Gidycz, 1993; Yeater & O'Donohue, 1999).

By taking a contextual approach to investigating episodes of IPV perpetration, researchers may need to examine the interactions between the victim and the perpetrator immediately preceding and following the IPV incident in order to identify relevant proximal antecedents and consequences related to the event. It should be emphasized, however, that the identification of these proximal antecedents and consequences should in no way be used to blame the victim or justify the abuse. In any instance of IPV perpetration, use of physical aggression against one's partner is never condoned and the victim should never be considered responsible for making their partner act aggressively. Instead, it is hoped that the information collected through this form of contextual analysis can be used to improve our understanding of IPV episodes, which can be utilized to inform future IPV prevention and treatment program development by helping victims to identify and effectively respond in situations where they may be at heightened risk for experiencing IPV.

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