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Violence as Coercive Control



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Synonyms

[Intimate partner violence](#); [Physical aggression](#);
[Sexual aggression](#); [Sexual conflict](#); [Sexual jealousy](#)

Definition

Ancestral men may have benefitted by inflicting physical and sexual violence against women to manipulate women's sexual behavior or to circumvent female sexual choice. Because gestation occurs within females, women are especially sensitive to the risk of violence and associated injury. The reproductive costs of physical harm are greater for women, and, therefore, some men use violence or threats of violence to control women's behavior.

Introduction

Mate guarding behaviors are intended to discourage an intimate partner from committing infidelity, defecting from the relationship, or being

poached by a rival (Buss 1988). Men use mate retention behaviors to combat the risk of the cuckoldry (unwitting investment in a rival's genetic offspring) and to minimize resource loss, whereas women use mate retention behaviors to retain a partner's long-term investment. Violence is a mate guarding strategy, mostly inflicted by men against women, to control a partner's sexual behavior or autonomy. Women are especially vulnerable to violence, and this is reflected in their reactions to threat of violence. For example, women respond to fear differently than men (McLean and Anderson 2009). Because women's reproduction depends on their ability to survive, women are especially fearful of risky or violent situations. Once conception occurs, men no longer need to survive to be reproductively successful, whereas women's survival is required for gestation and childrearing. Thus, women may have evolved psychological mechanisms that motivate them to avoid physical harm. Men may have coevolved mechanisms to exploit women's fear for their own reproductive benefit. By inflicting or threatening to inflict violence, men coerce women into sexual fidelity, maintaining the relationship, or securing sexual access (Buss 1988; Wilson and Daly 1993). Women cannot afford to risk physical injury, so acquiescing to men who use or threaten violence may sometimes be an effective self-defense strategy. Men use physical violence against women, including physical abuse or threats of physical abuse, to minimize paternity uncertainty. Men use sexual violence against

women, including sexual coercion and rape, to gain sexual access without investing resources into the woman. In sum, both physical and sexual aggression by men against women function to control and manipulate female sexual behavior.

Physical Violence as Coercive Control

Male sexual jealousy is a primary motivator for men's physical aggression against women (Daly and Wilson 1988). Because gestation occurs within women, men are at risk of investing time and resources into offspring to whom they are genetically unrelated. Thus, jealousy is produced by an evolved mechanism to alert individuals to potential or actual infidelity by their partner (Buss 2000). When men suspect or discover sexual infidelity, they are more likely than women to inflict violence against their partner (Daly and Wilson 1988). Fear of physical harm or death motivates women to avoid their partner's physical attacks, thus discouraging women from pursuing infidelities. Wilson and Daly (1993) suggest that by inhibiting a partner from committing sexual infidelity with aggression, men control with whom the woman reproduces. Additionally, through controlling a woman's sexual behavior, men reduce the risk of cuckoldry or mate poaching by a rival.

Sexual Violence as Coercive Control

In some instances, men use sexual aggression against women to bypass resource investment and female sexual choice (Thornhill and Palmer 2000). Thornhill and Palmer (2000) review the hypothesis that rape is produced by specialized adaptation, which motivates men to rape in specific circumstances. Rape may have been adaptive for ancestral men because it increased reproductive opportunities and required little time or resources to secure sexual access to a female. By circumventing female choice, sexual aggressors control a woman's reproduction. As with physical violence, women's fear of rape is related to perceived risk of physical harm or death (Pryor and Hughes 2013). Women's fear of injury or death

may inhibit them from engaging in self-defense during a rape. Additionally, partner rape sometimes occurs in the context of sperm competition (Goetz and Shackelford 2006). In those cases, men engage in sperm competition to attempt to affect their partner's reproduction before or after an actual or suspected infidelity.

Conclusion

Physical injury is particularly detrimental to a woman's reproduction because gestation occurs within women. Thus, women may have evolved psychological mechanisms that make them especially sensitive to risky situations. Men may have coevolved mechanisms that exploit women's fear of harm, for their own reproductive benefit. For example, men inflict physical and sexual violence against a woman to discourage her from committing infidelity, abandoning the relationship, or to circumvent female sexual choice. In sum, violence is inflicted by men against women to control a woman's sexual behavior.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Circumventing Mate Choice](#)
- ▶ [Coercive Control](#)
- ▶ [Contexts for Men's Aggression Against Women](#)
- ▶ [Mate Retention Strategies](#)
- ▶ [Sexual Coercion](#)

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