Guest Editors’ Introduction

Vigorous debate in social science research is a critical process that moves knowledge, research methods, and public policy forward. Contrasting conceptualizations can illuminate nuances that would otherwise be missed. The debate on men’s and women’s use of abusive behaviors in intimate relationships is a prime example.

Violence Against Women (VAW), under the leadership of Claire Renzetti, has proven an excellent venue for advancing knowledge about women’s aggression in the three-part special issue, Women’s Use of Violence in Intimate Relationships (vol. 8, nos. 11 & 12, vol. 9, no. 1). This array of articles provides an in-depth examination of women’s use of aggression. Undoubtedly, it has stimulated additional developments. We hope the current issue is one example. The primary articles and commentaries in this issue were originally presented and discussed at a National Institute of Justice Workshop on Gender Symmetry in late 2000. Although in development at the time, these articles have been updated to reflect current theory and data. Consistent with VAW’s editorial policy, a broad group of social scientists presents distinct theoretical perspectives and empirical approaches. Johnson, a sociologist, refines his theory that methodological differences are the source of conflicting data about domestic violence across studies. Swan, a social psychologist, and Snow, a clinical community psychologist, offer a compelling theoretical framework for women’s use of violence, with an emphasis on race, ethnicity, and class. Cook, a community psychologist, and Goodman, a clinical community psychologist, evaluate a brief measure of the interpersonal context of intimate violence with original data.

Other scholars respond to these articles, providing constructive criticism and encouraging the authors to push their thinking further. Evan Stark, a forensic social worker, responds to Johnson’s differentiation among types of violence by arguing that a coercive control model offers a viable alternative to the traditional domestic violence paradigm. Renzetti, in her review of Swan and Snow’s article, urges the development of “messy models” that further incorporate intersectionality—that is, the intersection of important status variables, such as gender, race, and class—to understand the multiple factors that contribute to women’s perpetration of intimate violence. Patricia Tjaden emphasizes the way in which Cook and Goodman’s findings provide further support to Johnson’s theory and calls for qualitative data in future attempts to assess the interpersonal context of partner violence.

We are fortunate to have Leora Rosen, a social anthropologist and program manager in the Violence Against Women and Family Violence Research and Evaluation Program at the National Institute of Justice, describe the history and rationale for the workshop. In doing so, she also sets the context for the articles. The issue closes with final commentaries by two prominent voices in the field of intimate partner violence: Walter DeKeseredy and Murray Straus. Both sociologists, they bring divergent
perspectives on the work presented. We hope this issue stimulates further dialogue, and we express appreciation to colleagues who attended the original workshop for their insightful discussion of our preliminary ideas, particularly John Jeffries, director and senior economist at the Vera Institute of Justice, who skillfully facilitated the large group discussion.

Sarah L. Cook  
*Georgia State University, Atlanta*  
Suzanne C. Swan  
*University of South Carolina, Columbia*